



Publication: Mercury - Main
Title: Ramaphosa vows to tackle City's issues
Publish date: 26 Feb 2024
Page: 1

Reach: 10610
AVE: R 31034.12
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Ramaphosa vows to tackle City's issues

President establishes working group to deal with challenges affecting businesses

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PRESIDENT Cyril Ramaphosa has established a "presidential war room" for eThekweni to work with the business sector to tackle water, electricity and infrastructure challenges facing the metro.

Ramaphosa announced the presidential eThekweni working group on Friday during an engagement with the Durban Chamber of Commerce and Industry NPC and business, saying the initiative was a partnership with the KwaZulu-Natal Growth Coalition.

The meeting was also attended by Ministers Pravin Gordhan (Public Enterprises), Bheki Cele (Police), Senzo Mchunu (Water and Sanitation), Kgosientsho Ramogopha (Electricity) and Shile Zikalala (Public Works and Infrastructure).

The latest Durban Business Confidence Index (BCI) Report for the fourth quarter of 2023, compiled by the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), found that business confidence had recorded a decline of 6.56 index points, settling at 38.12.

The majority of businesses operating in Durban revealed that eThekweni Municipality's response to service delivery issues was slow and that this was affecting the business sector's confidence in the City's ability to deal effectively with such challenges.

Significant challenges at Transnet with the deterioration of the freight rail network and inefficiency at Durban's port, the busiest in Africa, has also led to lost export sales and the fiscus losing revenue.

The ongoing load shedding crisis has also played a role in diminishing business growth and investment while adding to the country's unemployment crisis.

Ramaphosa's spokesperson, Vincent Magwenya, said the working group would be made up of ministers in the affected portfolios, working alongside the municipality and the business community.

Magwenya said the last presidential engagement had taken place in May 2022 and Friday's session presented an opportunity for the president and the Durban business community to recap on measures that had been put in place to "grow the province's economy and address the current water, electricity and infrastructure challenges".

"During the interaction, the president and the ministers briefed the business community on various initiatives that are currently under way in assisting eThekweni and the province through the various interventions led by the national government.

"To accelerate the speedy resolution of issues impacting the eThekweni Metro, President Ramaphosa has set up the presidential eThekweni working group that will be made up of ministers in the affected portfolios, working alongside the metro and business.

"The working group will present their progress reports to the president regularly," Magwenya said in a statement.

Andrzej Kiepiela of the KZN Growth Coalition said the working group was a welcome initiative as it would allow the president, ministers and other provincial leaders to work together on any direct requests from eThekweni or other municipalities.

"We are not going to just report on issues but also submit tangible solutions. One of these that we discussed with the president is the water and sanitation challenge in eThekweni, where the national department and business agreed on a strategy that was approved by the eThekweni council last year," Kiepiela said.

He added that despite the strategy being in place for almost a year, not much had been implemented.

"We said to the president that the strategy needs to be implemented as a priority."

Professor Harold Ngalawa, professor of economics at UKZN, said it was important that matters that were reported to Ramaphosa were followed through.

"The president has the authority to set up a committee and what happens afterwards is another discussion. Business has a realistic understanding that they are reporting issues to someone in authority and the president can do or not do something about these issues," Ngalawa said.

Economist Dawie Roodt said Ramaphosa's main objective was to win the elections, adding that the promises made in the ANC manifesto were unrealistic.

"Business priorities include electricity and a working rail network, but it has lost confidence in government. They want a government that is consistent, does the basics by maintaining things and does what it says it will do."



GLENWOOD High School head prefect Ethanda Maloyi, centre, with Ntando Zondi, left, and Siyabonga Matlajie lay flowers at the SS Mendi Memorial at the Maritime Museum in Durban yesterday. The SS Mendi steamship sank on February 21, 1917, in one of South Africa's worst tragedies of World War I. | DOCTOR NGCOBO Independent Newspapers

AIDS PROGRAMME

Pepfar extension hangs in the balance

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AMID tensions between the US and South Africa over the conflicts between Russia and Ukraine and Israel and Hamas, there is uncertainty over the five-year reauthorisation of the US President's Emergency Plan for Aids Relief (Pepfar) programme.

Pepfar is up for reauthorisation for the 2025-2030 period.

Siphumelele Duma, a postdoctoral research fellow at the Institute for Pan-African Thought and Conversation at the University of Johannesburg, said there have been recent strong and apparent tensions in US/SA relations.

Relations between the two countries have been on a downward trend since the Russian "invasion" of Ukraine, he said. This resulted from South Africa refusing to take a stance against Russia and instead lobbying for a negotiated settlement.

"This was not good enough for the US and its Western allies," he said.

Duma said the other issue was South Africa taking Israel to the International Court of Justice on a genocide case.

"South Africa blatantly supporting the Palestinian cause and accusing Israel

of genocide may not be received very well in Washington," he said.

However, US Embassy spokesperson in South Africa, David Feldmann, said Pepfar remained committed to the partnership with South Africa and other countries around the world to end HIV/AIDS as a public health threat by 2030.

"All Pepfar country teams around the world are currently updating two-year plans approved in May 2023 in consultation with partner governments, civil society organisations, and other development partners," said Feldmann.

"We recognise that a clean, five-year Pepfar reauthorisation is critical to end HIV/AIDS as a public health threat by 2030 and for the programme to support all 55 Pepfar partner countries, including South Africa, in reaching the 95-95-95 UNAids HIV treatment targets by 2025.

"We are confident that those who support Pepfar in the US Congress will find a path to approving a clean, five-year reauthorisation of this critical and lifesaving programme," said Feldmann.

Professor Salim Abdool Karim, director of the Centre for the Aids Programme of Research in South Africa (Caprisa), said if the five-year Pepfar programme was not reauthorised, it did not mean

the work will stop. It was currently being authorised on a year-to-year basis depending on the budget available.

"However, when it has to be authorised every year, then politics plays a bigger role and we can expect more political interference in Pepfar and its goals.

"If Pepfar didn't exist, it would have an impact on our Aids programme because it would mean that our government would have to find more money to make up for the shortfall."

He added that he believed that the central issue holding up the reauthorisation of Pepfar were laws against abortion.

He said Pepfar funding cannot be used for abortion services but Republican politicians wanted a new restriction added which called for those receiving Pepfar funding to not provide abortion services at all even if funded by others.

Dr Munya Saruchera, director of the Africa Centre for HIV/AIDS Management at Stellenbosch University, said South Africa has the largest population of people living with HIV and Pepfar works with local partners and the Health Department. Pepfar has been partnering with the government to provide antiretroviral treatment to more than 4 million people, he said.

PRIORITIES

Unstable energy supply a challenge to ANC's six manifesto promises

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THE ANC outlined six priorities, including job creation, driving industrial growth and tackling the high cost of living, during the launch of its election manifesto at the Moses Mabhida Stadium in Durban on Saturday.

But political analysts highlighted the need to fix the country's power crisis and ensure a stable electricity supply to these promises to be kept.

The stadium was filled to its 56 000-seater capacity with the adjoining People's Park converted into an overflow for more supporters on Saturday. ANC president Cyril Ramaphosa said the manifesto would provide a way forward for the country, sustaining and improving its democratic gains.

He said at the 2024 elections scheduled for May 29 the party would go beyond celebrating accomplishment and focus on the future.

"We will focus on six priorities which are critical to transform the economy and create jobs," he said.

- The jobs plan: Over the next five years, the ANC will implement a job plan, with the first pillar a massive public employment plan, by creating and sustaining 2.5 million work opportunities delivering public goods and services in communities.

- Industry: To deepen the transformation of the economy, the ANC will drive industrial growth, innovation and job creation, with active support for localisation and labour-intensive industries.

- Cost of living: Ramaphosa said the party would take steps to make every day life more affordable for workers the unemployed, and the middle class by addressing key needs such as food housing, healthcare, energy and wages.

- Invest in people: He said the party would continue to invest in people by improving access to quality education and health, expanding the use of science and technology, and ensuring that all people have decent housing and basic services.

Political analyst Professor Bhek Mngomezulu said the main manifesto points could only be achieved with a reliable supply of energy. "You cannot industrialise and you cannot invest in people if you do not have a stable electricity grid."

Another analyst, Dr Levy Ndou, said "It is in government's hands to ensure that the environment in South Africa is conducive for the economy to grow and indeed the private sector to be able to do its work and create jobs at the same time."