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'Hard time for convicts'

WIN-WIN: CAN SAVE TAXPAYERS MONEY AND MAKE PRISONERS USEFUL

» **Experts widely back idea as a way to pay back to society.**

Brian Sokutu

With the department of correctional services' incarceration programme expenditure expected to increase from R26.5 billion to R28.4 billion in the next financial year, experts are calling on government to rethink its policy of not allowing prisoners to undertake manual labour jobs.

This is against the background of ActionSA Eastern Cape chair Athol Trollip's call for prisoners to contribute to society by working on farms and state-owned buildings as labourers.

Concerned about the vandalised state of the Allanridge community hall in the town of Kariega,

Trollip and ActionSA president Herman Mashaba this week visited the facility, named after anti-apartheid cleric Reverend Allan Hendrickse.

"This highlights the urgent action needed to restore the rule of law in the community and similar communities across SA. The hall, which hosted community functions, has been destroyed since the Covid pandemic," said Trollip.

He and Mashaba were "shocked" at the extent of the destruction. "The facility, referred to as the famous 'Carnegie Hall' of the Eastern Cape, is an empty shell of its former glory."

Kamesh police station, across the road from the hall, has apparently done nothing to stop the vandalism – leaving the community defenceless amid drug users, former convicts and criminals, who have stripped the hall to sell materials to scrapyards.

"Repeated promises by politicians to fix the hall have yielded no results, with the sports facility adjacent to the destroyed community centre totally vandalised," said Trollip.

He called on government to allow prisoners to contribute to society by working on state-owned farms or public-related projects – a view endorsed by experts.

Dr Lukas Muntingh, director of the Dullah Omar Institute at the University of the Western Cape, said: "The suggestion is good. Prisoners should bring in labour and learn skills to rebuild the country's facilities. This will get them out of boredom and the confines of prison."

"The apartheid regime had an obsession about being self-sufficient – using prisoners to build furniture for government buildings and involving them in food production. In the past, prisoners worked on farms and workshops – a policy which has now changed."

Muntingh said the prisoner profile has changed, with many imprisoned for violence and rape.

"The change in government policy is based on the desire to curb prisoner escapes. Prisoner escapes form a part of key performance areas of senior warders, leading to suspensions – hence these are now few."

"Also, prisoners are not covered against injuries sustained in work outside the prison."

Dennis Bloem, former parliamentary correctional services portfolio committee chair, said: "My view has always been that inmates sentenced for petty offences – with prison sentences ranging from 12 months to five years – must be kept busy by giving them work. They will be paying back to society."

"Inmates can work on prison farms to produce their own food, with taxpayers saving billions of rands. The department of public works can utilise qualified inmates to maintain government buildings."

"Thousands of prisoners are crying out to be allowed to go to communities and work, but authorities refuse. The government is spending billions on healthy people sitting in prison cells doing nothing," Bloem said.

Correctional Services national spokesperson Singabakho Nxumalo did not respond to questions sent to him by *Saturday Citizen*. – brians@citizen.co.za