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The South African Police Service's (SAPS) Forensic Science Laboratory (FSL) is grappling with a DNA case backlog exceeding 140 000 cases, with infrastructure failures identified as the primary cause.

Ian Cameron, chairperson of the portfolio committee on police, has strongly criticised the FSL's approach to addressing the crisis, dismissing Major-General Tshilidzi Mulaudzi's suggestion that establishing provincial laboratories would solve the problem as "unrealistic".

Cameron argued that systemic issues, not a lack of facilities, are to blame. "The SAPS must deal with systematic issues affecting the FSL currently, not seek pie-in-the-sky solutions unachievable within the country's fiscal constraints," he said.

Recent findings from the National Forensic Oversight and Ethics Board (DNA Board) reveal the backlog has reached 141 190 cases as of December 2024, representing 36,81% of all cases — far exceeding the 10% target.

The DNA Board warned of "potential negative repercussions", including delays in offender detection, impacts on the National Forensic DNA Data-

base, and strain on the criminal justice system.

Cameron highlighted underfunding, poor planning, and inadequate support for existing laboratories as key contributors to the crisis.

Parliamentary reports reveal critical forensic instruments have been non-operational since 2020 due to expired maintenance contracts, while inadequate storage has forced case files into corridors and caused exhibits to fall off shelves in overcrowded safe rooms, posing health and safety risks. "These challenges stem from poor management and the undermining of science in resolving criminal cases," Cameron said.

The DNA Board identified three main environmental issues hampering FSL performance: air conditioning, water, and electricity failures. Deteriorating relationships between SAPS and the Department of Public Works and Infrastructure have exacerbated maintenance delays. High-density operations and a project sampling convicted offenders have further increased analytical workloads.

The FSL has prioritised court-bound and gender-based violence (GBV) cases, ensuring no delays in these categories through an FSL-National Prosecuting Authority initiative.