

**MINISTER'S OPENING REMARKS AT THE MEETING OF THE PORTFOLIO
COMMITTEE**

DATE: 19.09.2006

SUBJECT: EASTERN CAPE REPORT

The department would like to express appreciation for the opportunity to share information with the portfolio Committee on developments in the Eastern Cape Region.

Honourable Members of the Portfolio Committee will agree that such interaction promotes mutual learning for both the members of the department and the Portfolio Committee. It also presents an opportunity to clarify facts in what may otherwise remain incorrect perceptions. Most of the presentations we have been making to the Portfolio Committee this year bear testimony to this fact.

The Regional Commissioner Eastern Cape will present a report that responds to the specific set of issues raised in the report. My role is simply to present an introduction for her report.

We have had the opportunity to peruse the report of the Portfolio Committee's visit to the Eastern Cape and would like to thank members of this committee for the work they did over the week they spent in the province. The report is very extensive and it demonstrates the commitment by Honourable Members of the committee to contribute to the resolution of some of the challenges that confront the department.

The report contains many observations which we share concur with the Portfolio Committee. These include the twin problems of awaiting trial detainees and overcrowding, the commitment to fight corruption, the imposition of harsh sentences for relatively minor offences, the difficulties in retaining scarce skills as well as the conditions of employment of our employees.

Unfortunately, while we share many of the observations of the members of the Portfolio Committee, there is a combination of factors which, even with the best of intentions, make it difficult or in a few instances, quite impossible for us to implement all the recommendations made by the committee. Examples of these factors are the following:

- The department is governed by national policies and legislation which standardize how it should conduct its business. In this regard for instance, it is not within our power to introduce measures to retain scarce skills. Policy would also not allow us to involve the Portfolio Committee in recruitment processes.
- Some of the recommendations in their nature require a multi year implementation plan. Examples of this include the conclusion of the even day working week, recruitment to create the requisite capacity management of overcrowding and ongoing negotiations with the Judiciary to implement alternative sentencing.

We have also noted that a number of recommendations deal with issues that the department is already dealing with on its own or as part of the cluster. Examples include: filling in of vacancies, a national plan to reduce the number of escapes, interaction with other stakeholders to remove children from correctional centres as well as the Cabinet project of producing a new, innovative solution to the problem of awaiting trial detention as well as the adoption of an Integrated Human Resource Strategy.

Members of the Portfolio Committee have already observed that in many instances, there is an information gap between what members know and the status quo on those matters. It has already been suggested that there may be a need for an intensive information session between the Honourable Members and management. I also believe that such an information session is necessary and have already instructed my managers to liaise with the secretariat of the Committee to find a suitable date for a two day workshop in which the department shall update the committee on a range of issues. Such a workshop can be held towards the end of October to ensure that it takes the form of a mid term performance review.

The most unfortunate factor about the observations and recommendations of the Portfolio Committee is that some of them are based on information received from inmates or officials which is either incorrect or inaccurate. Examples of this include the alleged situation where one person acts in three positions, placement of people far from their home towns (when in fact, as a result of desperation, people apply for jobs fully aware that their placement will be very far from their homes), the impression created that there are no promotion opportunities in the department and reported lack of management intervention in Middledrift.

Our experience from visiting management areas is that in many instances, some individuals will distort information or refuse to accept policy developments or management interventions in they are not in their favour. Such individuals will use opportunities such as the visits by the Portfolio Committee to extract sympathy, often at the expense of the truth. There is of course the worse case scenario where people will project the department as a failure in order to advance their own agendas.

Notwithstanding all these factors, I would like to emphasise that it is certainly not our impression that the majority of our officials set out to mislead the Portfolio Committee. Indeed some of them may truly be unaware of these developments as a result of some blockages in communication. This matter is addressed in the committee's recommendations and the department is addressing it. Already, as will be seen in the Regional Commissioner's report, she has started a process of quarterly roadshows in which she visits all management areas in the region to update members.

I would also like to assure members of the Honourable Members of this committee that contrary to the impression that may have been created, the department has ongoing processes and concrete plan to address the challenges faced by the Eastern Cape. These include:

The appointment of a Regional Commissioner in January this year, following the long drawn-out legal action taken by the erstwhile Regional Commissioner Mr R Mataka after his dismissal. This has been complimented by the appointment of a Deputy Regional Commissioner last month.

After a thorough analysis of the operational requirements of the department in the Eastern Cape and the EC region, we have effected transfers and redeployment of many of the senior managers in the region.

We would like to concur with the observation of the Portfolio Committee that Middledrift is indeed one of the major challenges facing the department in the Eastern Cape. On the other hand, we believe that it is always necessary to explain the context of the Middledrift environment:

The correctional centre was the biggest security facility during the reign of the homeland administration. This has left it with a negative legacy and institutional culture that we are certainly turning around.

It is now common knowledge that the centre has, for a very long time been used as a power base for individuals and groups which, for reasons that may have been related to their agendas, embarked on actions that had the effect of undermining the programs of the department. This agenda manifested in various forms which included collusion with inmates to break the law, non productivity at work, industrial action and a general tendency to refuse to be bound by progressive agreements between management and labour.

We are confident that the interventions currently under way in Middledrift will, once and for all resolve many of these problems.

Earlier this year, I also appointed a National Task Team to conduct a thorough analysis of the changes that need to be put in place at the correctional centre and submit recommendations to management for implementation. The terms of reference of the Task Team include the consideration of the classification of the centre, audit and costing of the security equipment needed, determination of its staff compliment and suggestions on the extent of capital projects that need to be embarked on.

I have observed with pleasure that some of the recommendations of the Portfolio Committee are similar to the proposals being considered by the Task Team.

I am also confident that unlike previously, factors such as the resolve of the leadership at the Regional office, the diligence and management abilities of the Acting Correctional Centre Manager (who we must place on record that is one of the department's best managers in the region, as opposed to the unfortunate and false statements that have been made about him in the media) as well as coordination with head office will combine to deliver the required results on Middledrift.

Confidential

I would like to conclude by making a special plea on behalf of our managers at Head Office and correctional centres across the country that while we recognize, respect and appreciate the oversight role performed by the Portfolio Committee, we respect that whenever necessary, members be guarded about some of the statements and policy pronouncements they make in the during their visits to the centres. We realize fully that it is not our place to tell elected representatives what to say but we hope that by the same token, members will realize that they are duly held in high esteem by members and inmates and therefore any statement they make, whether it is based on a stated intention or a reflection of government policy, may be taken as *fait accompli* by those who hear it.

Members will appreciate that we have just emerged from an unfortunate history where there was a serious contestation of authority between management and labor in most of our centres. This left the department with an indecisive and vulnerable management echelon, a situation which I am proud to say we have slowly but certainly managed to reverse. It becomes very sad and unfortunate then, when policy and procedural decisions taken by these managers are unjustly questioned and criticized by elected representatives, sometimes on the basis of information received from people who for their own reasons, had been opposed to them in the first place.

Thank you