

To succeed in a globalised world, South Africa needs a bold new approach to international relations

By Mergan Chetty MP – Shadow Deputy Minister of International Relations and Cooperation

Greetings and salutations Honourable Speaker, Ministers, Deputy Ministers, Honourable Members, our guests in the gallery and fellow South Africans,

I quote the late great Martin Luther King who said *“Life’s most persistent and urgent question is, ‘what are you doing for others?’”*.

How apt, Honourable Minister, is this quote with reference to the Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO) and the role that it plays on the African continent. According to the Annual Performance Plan (APP) presented to the Committee last week, R1.1 billion is allocated for Program 5, international transfers which provides for South Africa’s membership to international organisations, such as the United Nations, African Union and South African Development Corporation.

A persistent source of discomfort during the 5th Parliament was always that South Africa was not receiving value for money in return for these membership fees. The amount contributed should surely ensure that we are at the forefront of setting the agenda, not merely sitting on the sidelines, as is currently the case. South Africa has always been the reluctant leader, even when our African compatriots view us as a beacon of hope for the continent.

But then again, one need not look far on why we struggle to own our place as a geopolitical leader. Despite the international embarrassment that Ambassador Zinzi Mandela brought to the country, President Cyril Ramaphosa still went ahead and extended her tenure.

Also, Minister, the shocking testimony at the Zondo commission by yet another delinquent Ambassador, Bruce Kaloane from the Netherlands, and his involvement in the irregular and illegal landing of the infamous Gupta plane at Waterkloof, should warrant his removal from office. Frankly, Honourable members, we can do better in vetting ambassadors and diplomatic staff.

Honourable Minister, you need to awaken from the dream that President Ramaphosa concocted during his State of the Nation Address (SONA), and come to the realisation that the appointment of ambassadors needs to move away from the current patronage model where political rejects are given a soft landing. Government should be bold enough to appoint ambassadors from opposition parties who have played a role in the advancement of South Africa’s democracy.

Minister, this government’s foreign policy veer to the East, where we seem comfortable to be playing second fiddle to China and Russia, has not been met with the same zeal from our own citizens. Students, who not out of their own choice, but desperation, go to China to study medicine, suddenly to find themselves with medical qualifications that they can’t practice with here in South Africa.

The former Minister of Education, Blade Nzimande, made an unfulfilled executive promise to recognise these medical qualifications. Minister, you have an opportunity to right this wrong by taking up the plight of South Africans who spend years in foreign universities studying, only to be rejected by their own country. We simply cannot lose this vital human resource.

The department's handling of the suspension and ongoing investigation of its CFO, leaves much to be desired. The lack of decisiveness has a direct bearing on how we effectively use DIRCO for the South African brand and meet our obligations internationally.

In as much as we seem to sing our own praises regarding the country's international footprint, this does come with financial constraints. Serious consideration should be given to downsizing some diplomatic missions and merging functions such as tourism advocacy with consular services.

The need for cost cutting measures has further been reinforced by the Department's own acknowledgement that there is widespread fruitless and wasteful expenditure across our missions and properties abroad. Spending money on properties that are not being used, is not only a waste of money, but is an insult to South Africans who are homeless and destitute.

Honourable Minister, the 5th Parliament went by and the Department failed to ensure that the Foreign Services Bill was approved. It is my sincere hope that you will play your role to facilitate the passing of this legislation within the 6th Parliament.

One of the mandates of DIRCO is to assist South African citizens abroad, yet on numerous occasions, most of them have often been left stranded due to red tape at our embassies. We have to understand that when people are in foreign lands, they are vulnerable, and an embassy is the only point of contact providing a form of saving grace.

As I conclude, Honourable Minister, I want to remind you that the sooner you realise that DIRCO is the coalface of our engagement with the rest of the globe, the sooner we can begin to chart a foreign policy that advances our interests and establishes our role as a geopolitical leader.

We need to move away from this culture where DIRCO is morphing into a moribund department, and re-energise its vision towards fruitful engagement with our allies and international partners.

We hope that during your tenure, South Africa will leverage its diplomatic footprint to drive an agenda for a more humane foreign policy in Africa and abroad.

I thank you.