



The Portfolio Committee on International Relations and Cooperation requested updates on the COVID-19-related activities of the Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO), which are provided in terms of the responses to the following questions. Given the overlap between some questions, the relevant responses should be read together:

1. The impact of the initiatives by the Department to facilitate the repatriation of South African citizens who were in the Wuhan Province in China, and subsequent initiatives which facilitated repatriation of citizens from Brazil, Germany, Indonesia, India and others, in order to assist the Government in curbing the COVID-19 pandemic.

DIRCO established a dedicated team with channels where those requesting repatriation could contact officials, under the auspices of the Consular Incident Command Centre (CICC). The implementation of the Repatriation Project, including through partnering with other countries which sought to repatriate their own nationals from South Africa, focussed on stranded and distressed South Africans who, in many cases, have become destitute due to protracted stays abroad as a result of the global lock-down. Repatriations were facilitated through both air and land ports of entry.

Wuhan City, China, was the only epicentre of the outbreak before COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic. Most countries repatriated their stranded citizens. The first repatriation of South African citizens stranded abroad as a result of the COVID-19 was from Wuhan City, with 114 citizens being repatriated on 13 March 2020.

The repatriation flight from Wuhan City created expectations that Government would consider similar repatriation flights for citizens stranded elsewhere abroad.

DIRCO has negotiated with airlines, primarily with SAA (including an agreement with SASOL for a fuel donation to SAA to contribute towards the expenses), but also, in conjunction with Missions. Qatar Airways, Etihad, Emirates, Saudi Airways and Ethiopian Airways also provide flights, on a fare-paying basis, for the repatriation of South African citizens. Such flights generally took place in partnership with evacuation flights for foreign nationals who were returning to their countries of origin. In cases where South Africans were destitute, the Department utilized existing Government mechanism, such as a form which is an acknowledgement of debt and a commitment on the part of the passengers concerned to repay the loan amounting to the cost of the airfare on a repatriation flight.

Overall, South African Missions have facilitated repatriation flights from Central and Eastern Europe, North and South America, Africa, Asia and the Middle East and Australasia.

Missions in Africa also assisted with the repatriation of, for example, SADC citizens, on flights bound for South Africa. This collaboration has strengthened the relations with the countries of the region.

In several instances, Missions have also assisted South Africans to arrange private charter flights, including from regions that were not easily serviced by the repatriation flights arranged through the larger traditional commercial and freight carriers.

The impact of the successful repatriations was that these South African citizens reunited with their families, friends and loved ones, and were able to avoid unnecessary and unplanned costs and expenses that they would have had to incur had they stayed in the region for a longer period. The initiatives taken by DIRCO have positively impacted on the image of South Africa, as a responsible global citizen and as a leader on the African continent, through the manner in which South Africa has responded to the crisis. In particular, the repatriation of South Africans under exceedingly difficult and unchartered circumstances has demonstrated the actions of a caring Government.

Numerous expressions of gratitude have been received by DIRCO, demonstrating a renewed understanding and a greater appreciation by the public of the role that the Department, including Missions, are playing abroad.

To date, the Government has repatriated more than five thousand (5000) South African citizens.

2. The role of South African Missions abroad in extending consular services to South Africans with different challenges abroad brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. What types of assistance was being offered to those South Africans in various parts of the world, and the impact of such consular services offered?

The Department has coordinated all efforts for the repatriation of stranded and distressed South Africans abroad through the Central Incident Command Centre (CICC). Dedicated hot lines and e-mail addresses, both at Head Office and at Missions, are in place to deal with enquiries from the South African public at home and abroad. Missions also expanded and diversified the traditional means of communication and outreach through all social media platforms.

At the start of the repatriation process on 7 April 2020, the Department had a database of almost 5 000 South Africans stranded abroad. By 18 May 2020, almost 6000 South Africans had been registered as stranded abroad. In terms of categorization, of those, 284 indicated that they were destitute, 815 as distressed and 4894 as stranded.

South African Missions have been at the forefront of the crisis by offering consular services to distressed citizens, which has been compounded by the desperation and fear experienced by citizens, brought on by, for example, loss of employment and

income, a lack of accommodation, dwindling funds, an increased cost of living, the expiration of visas, a lack of transportation, closed border posts, exorbitant food costs, limited seating on outbound flights, food shortages and chronic medical issues.

Initiatives to provide consular assistance, in the context of significant financial and other resource constraints, included:

- The ongoing registration of a growing number of South African citizens abroad;
- The facilitation of special exemptions at the ports of entry in host countries, in cases where citizens stranded in other countries in the region travelled to departure airports for repatriation;
- Arrangements for the screening of passengers before departure;
- The vetting of all passengers and confirming their citizenship through the appropriate channels;
- Liaising with airlines to obtain all relevant and updated flight information;
- Recording the names of persons who were stranded and in distress abroad, as well as of those who indicated their wish to return, but are unable to do so due to the absence of commercial flights;
- Providing information to parents in South Africa about the status and wellbeing of their children who are studying abroad;
- The submission of comprehensive lists of citizens to the CICC for processing to National Joint Operational and Intelligence Structure (NATJOINTS) for pre-clearance through the appropriate channels in advance of repatriation flights;
- Liaison with various aviation companies to negotiate commercial or charter flight to repatriate distressed citizens;
- Negotiations with commercial and private airlines for reduced airfares;
- Liaison with the host country on reciprocal repatriation agreements and *gratis* extension of visas;
- Advising citizens of cheaper accommodation options, where available;
- Establishing direct links with the leaders of specific groups of South Africans for coordination purposes, including using email and social media to provide accurate information about future repatriation flights and to counter “fake news”;
- Facilitation of private charter flights where citizens arranged such flights privately;
- Assisting citizens with unique challenges, such as a lack of accommodation, food or chronic medication, etc. with the help of NGOs to provide for the needs of such persons;
- Raising money from donors to assist with flight and other costs for citizens;
- Linking local NGOs with destitute citizens abroad in need of financial support; and
- Providing emotional and other support to stranded, distressed and destitute South Africans.

In addition to the abovementioned impact of consular services, the Department's efforts have been instrumental in bringing South Africans home, re-uniting them with family and friends, demonstrating that, as a nation, South Africans stand together in these difficult times. The provision of consular services brought a sense of calm and

order for many, especially those who were assisted with food, accommodation and medicine when funds ran low or were depleted completely, while awaiting repatriation.

- 3. Cognizant of the fact that the world has implemented various degrees of lockdowns, limiting movements of people to fight the pandemic, what plans and initiatives do South African Missions have to ensure a safe return of the citizens, and that citizens do not find themselves on the wrong side of immigration laws of those countries regarding their unintentional extended stay in to those countries?**

Missions have had to adapt to local regulations, but foreign Governments generally allow Diplomatic Missions some flexibility in movement in the execution of official duties. South African citizens abroad are being advised to observe local lock-down rules and regulations.

As the COVID-19 crisis is far from over, efforts to facilitate the repatriation of citizens will continue. This, given the fact that many of those South Africans who initially indicated that they do not need repatriation, are now beginning to make requests for repatriation, due to unemployment and economic difficulties being experienced. The initiatives taken by Missions will have to be maintained as the crisis unfolds.

Missions are continuing to negotiate with relevant authorities in host countries to grant authorisation to South African citizens to board flights, despite expired travel documentation. Some countries have provided automatic visa renewals and extensions, which have helped alleviate the stress on stranded South Africans abroad. Most countries have agreed not to penalize South Africans who stayed longer than their visas permitted. In countries which have imposed penalties on visa renewals, diplomatic engagements to resolve the matter are continuing.

Negotiations are under way with Air India to arrange repatriation flights. Other flights are being arranged for stranded and destitute South Africans to return from the USA and UK. South Africans in smaller numbers in more remote regions of the world will also be able to take advantage of special repatriation flights being negotiated with Emirates, Qatar Airways and Ethiopian Airlines to return to South Africa.

Missions are assisting with information regarding visa requirements for connecting flights and with the facilitation of smooth passage to the airports that are expected to be used for future repatriation flights. These and other actions are assisting many stranded South African citizens in preparation for repatriation to South Africa.

- 4. The Government has been calling out for assistance for medical equipment and other forms of assistance in order to fight the pandemic. What role has the Department played in terms of sourcing assistance from friends of South Africa, including China, across the globe, and what forms of assistance has been received so far through the efforts of the Department?**

The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that maintaining strong international relations with all countries during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic is essential as the well-being of their nations, more than ever before, depends on cooperation between all countries. South Africa has reached out to the international community at large, using various high-level platforms, including virtual Summits with world leaders, to support its fight against the spread of the pandemic, as well as the other countries on the Continent, and help stem the devastating social and economic fall-out.

Through the efforts of DIRCO, several countries and public and private organizations made donations of medical equipment and offers of technical assistance to South Africa, including, amongst others China, the UAE, Germany, Denmark, Sweden, Russia, the UK, the EU, the USA, China and Turkey. Also, the Indian Government, when requested, agreed to lift export restrictions on 26 Active Pharmaceutical Ingredients (APIs) deemed crucial for South Africa's need for adequate medical and pharmaceutical supplies in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. This will facilitate the export of certain pharmaceuticals and formulations in favour of South Africa.

South African companies have been assisted with customs clearance procedures for medical equipment bought in China, in addition to purchases by the National Department of Health and the National Health Laboratory Services of critical supplies needed in the country's fight against COVID-19.

Several bilateral science cooperation initiatives have been launched with other countries to exchange information on COVID-19 treatment and research.

- 5. The Portfolio Committee has learned with appreciation that Cuba, a historical friend and partner of South Africa, is sending 180 doctors to assist in fighting the pandemic in South Africa. What role has the Department played in this initiative and what will be the impact of their presence in South Africa towards the fight against the pandemic?**

The strong and historic relations between South Africa and Cuba was deepened on the basis of the existing bilateral agreement on cooperation in the area of health, that served as a basis for discussions on how Cuba could assist South Africa in curbing the spread of COVID-19. After discussions between the two Presidents, and following substantive and ongoing engagements between the Department and the Government of Cuba, through the South African Embassy in Havana, as well as the Cuban Embassy in Pretoria, it was agreed that 217 members of a Cuban medical brigade would be deployed to South Africa. The medical brigade arrived in South Africa on the evening of 26 April 2020 and the specialists have been deployed, under contract, by the Department of Health.

- 6. Has the Department consulted the authorities in China regarding claims of mistreatment, including forced testing, random isolation and evictions of Africans living in the Guangzhou province in Southern China, and what is the outcome of discussions if any?**

The Department has been pro-active in dealing with this matter, in conjunction with other African Governments, through their Diplomatic Missions.

When the alleged mistreatment of African nationals in China became known, DIRCO issued a media statement and conducted media interviews to condemn the actions.

On 13 April 2020, a meeting of Africa Group of Ambassadors with the Chinese Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs was held, during which the Vice-Minister responded to the allegations of mistreatment of African nationals in Guangdong Province. Assurances were given that China abhors xenophobia, discrimination and racism of any kind and African nationals would not be singled out in prevention and control measures.

During a bilateral meeting held with the Deputy Director-General of the African Affairs Department in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 15 April 2020, the processes undertaken by the Government of China to ensure that the Provincial authorities in Guangdong Province, and its capital city Guangzhou, were observing fair, just and equal treatment of all nationalities in the implementation processes of the prevention and control measures against the outbreak of COVID-19, were explained.

At the BRICS Virtual Foreign Minister's Meeting on the COVID-19 crisis and its impact on 28 April 2020, Minister Pandor stated that "South Africa strongly condemns any stigmatization or discrimination of States, peoples or individuals in connection with COVID-19" and stressed "that there is no place for racism and xenophobia in the response to the pandemic..."

Subsequent to these engagements, there have been no further reports of mistreatment of African nationals in Guangdong Province.