**Parliament, Friday, 30 October 2020** – The Portfolio Committee on International Relations and Cooperation undertook an assessment of its work from 3 July to 15 December 2019, and its achievements over the first 100 days of conducting oversight over the mandate of the Department of International Relations and Cooperation. The two most important issues on the committee’s agenda, with Parliament’s oversight model providing the enabling environment, were foreign policy activities and the finalisation of the Foreign Service Bill 2015.

The report flowing from the assessment highlights the areas in which the committee made an impact on the department’s mandate. The Chairperson of the committee, Ms Tandi Mahambehlala, noted that the report is a monitoring tool for the committee’s oversight work and also a building block for its five-year legacy report. “It should be borne in mind that due to the unique mandate of the department, which is largely executed by the 125 South African missions abroad, the committee has to oversee the activities of those missions abroad as well,” she said.

However, in terms of Parliament’s oversight model, committees are only allowed to travel abroad on what is termed a “study tour” once in a five-year term. “This renders this committee unable to conduct oversight in missions,” said Ms Mahambehlala. The committee noted that diplomacy is a tool to advance national interests and economic development. However, because of the restrictions on overseas travel and the subsequent constraints on committee oversight, there was no full accountability on the implementation of South Africa’s foreign policy.

The committee thus resolved to address the Presiding Officers to review the matter. Ms Mahambehlala observed that, “In order for the country to succeed, it must have and utilise adequate footprint abroad to cater for its interests, and that requires an equally effective oversight abroad.”

As a result of this intervention, the committee undertook a verification oversight visit to New York in December 2019. The main objective was to make a determination on the findings of the Auditor-General’s report of 2017/18. “The committee was able to establish that there was no vacant land, for which taxpayers’ money, to the tune of R117 million, was already paid by the department,” said Ms Mahambehlala. The committee recommended that the project be put on hold, payments recouped and consequence management implemented.

Another issue was the slow relocation process of the two missions in New York. The committee established that the department had selected office space that resembled an abandoned parking lot instead of ready-to-move-in office accommodation. “It became critical for the department to explain how a decision was arrived at, to prefer the parking lot. As a result, that decision was reviewed and the process had to start again,” Ms Mahambehlala explained.

While in New York, the committee gained insight into the political dynamics within the United Nations (UN) Security Council that affect the work of the South African mission in New York. “The committee is resolute that South Africa should, more than ever, advocate for the reform of the UN Security Council to make it representative and more sensitive to issues of developing countries,” Ms Mahambehalala stated. This sentiment has found expression in the department’s strategic plan.

The Foreign Service Bill is another achievement of the committee’s first 100 days in office. The bill’s objective is to provide legislative mechanisms that optimally support the department’s mandate. After the bill was referred back to the committee in August 2019, the committee resolved to process and finalise the Foreign Service Bill before end of December 2019. To this end, the bill was adopted by the National Assembly in November 2019 and President Cyril Ramaphosa assented to it on 26 May 2020, thus becoming the Foreign Service Act, No 26 of 2019.

Regarding operational issues hampering the department’s work, the committee verified the issues identified by the Auditor-General as contributing to the department’s negative audit outcomes. The committee’s oversight interventions subsequently contributed to easing departmental bottlenecks.

As a result of the robust engagement between the committee and the department, a good working relationship is developing as the department responds to the committee’s oversight interventions. Ms Mahambehlala concluded: “The report is work in progress. It will be used as a monitoring tool on the department’s activities and shows the committee’s robust approach to oversight of the department. Hats off to the committee!”

**ISSUED BY THE PARLIAMENTARY COMMUNICATION SERVICES ON BEHALF OF THE CHAIRPERSON OF THE PORTFOLIO COMMITTEE ON INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND COOPERATION, MS TANDI MAHAMBEHLALA.**