**NATIONAL ASSEMBLY**

**QUESTION FOR WRITTEN REPLY**

**QUESTION NO. 2637**

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**INTERNAL QUESTION PAPER 27 – 2022**

**2637. Mr A C Roos (DA) to ask the Minister of Home Affairs:**

(a) What are the reasons that his department has chosen to use an email appointment booking system for new asylum applicants instead of opening refugee reception centres, (b) under what legal provisions is his department empowered to introduce an email booking system rather than an in-person queuing system, (c) what is the current backlog of asylum applications, (d) what is the current backlog on asylum application appeals, (e) on what date are refugee reception offices planned to fully reopen and (f) what number of appointment emails have been (i) received and (ii) booked and (g) what was the average waiting time for each person booking an appointment as at 31 May 2022? NW3153E

**REPLY:**

1. The rationale for the email solution is to try to work the two-year backlog downwards without troubling over around 40 000 clients to come to offices at once whilst the capacity can only take a limited number. It must be noted that the offices were closed for a period of two years due to disaster regulations and over this period no new asylum applications were processed. This booking solution was in place before the state of disaster, only difference is that clients would have travelled to office to get the future appointment, as launched in 2017 as the ABT (Automated Booking Terminals). The email solution serves to limit large crowds to offices that can lead to overcrowdings and stampedes.

On 25 January 2022, at the High Level Bilateral engagement between Minister and UNHCR Assistant High Commissioner for Protection, it was further agreed that the Department should develop a solution for new asylum applicants to deal with the COVID disaster induced backlog for new asylum applications. This email solution was developed and deployed on 03 May 2022. It was initially suggested by UNHCR, as the custodians of international protection, during the lockdown period and was immediately developed and rolled out for existing clients who wished to extend existing permits. Civil Society and UNHCR have also been advised to assist clients through this booking solution.

 (b) The solution was deployed as a compliance with the State of Disaster Regulations. It now works as a mechanism to ensure control and order during the recovery period of these services. It is the same mechanism that was utilised before the state of disaster where the Department cannot assist everyone in the form of the ABT (Automated Booking Terminal) that was launched and deployed in 2017. The deference is that the ABT expect clients to travel to the office to make a future booking whilst email brings services at their comfort. The ABT solution was challenged in the Qheberha High Court in 2019. The High Court judgement does concur with the Department that where resources and demand do not match the Department should utilise a booking solution that does not expose clients.

(c) There is a total of 9057 booked for future dates. There are 31 973 emails not yet processed which includes duplicates, unrelated requests/queries and incomplete requests.

 Given the backlog estimates built over the past two years, the department is embarking on strategies to recover full services in manner that reduces the possibility of overcrowding in this area that include;

• Continuation of the online solutions to manage the volumes of clients visiting offices versus capacity.

• Increase capacity at offices with limited capacity

• Prioritize the reopening of CTRRO to new comers

• Utilize overtime in particular on critical areas like new comer adjudication

(d) 131 190 remain to be finalised at the level of appeal.

(e) The Refugee Reception Centers were opened to all services on 03 May 2022, except for newcomers in Cape Town where the Department is still finalising renovations of the new office. The offices are attending to clients through appointments. Clients who walk-in without appointment, where capacity allows, are also attended to over and above scheduled appointments.

 The Department is also finalising the recovery strategy which includes fast-tracking recruitment of additional staff, working overtime and the re-opening of the Cape Town Refugee Center. These processes, once concluded, will assist in eradicating the backlog that was created by the closure.

(f)(i) 17 455 received as at 31 May 2022, including duplicates.

(f)(ii) 1860 have been booked as at 31 May 2022.

(g) The waiting period varies at each Center given the capacity disparities and language interpretation requirements. The Department in this regard is increasing capacity in offices like Durban and Qheberha in order to meet the demand. Waiting periods are as follows:

 Desmond Tutu: One to two months

 Musina: Slots available instantly

 Qheberha: One month to twelve months (with only two RSDOs processing newcomers and the Department is currently recruiting an additional 12 RSDOs and a Centre Manager)

 Durban: One to fourteen months (the office has introduced additional recent slots and clients are encouraged to rebook for earlier dates)

**END**