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NEWS

Clear backlog and say sorry, minister told



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MASERU – HOME Affairs Minister must issue a formal public apology within 30 days and clear all outstanding applications for passports, IDs and residency permits.

In a damning report released on Tuesday, the Ombudsman Advocate Tlotliso Polaki said there was “administrative paralysis” at the ministry regarding the issuance of documents and permits.

Advocate Polaki said Minister Lebona Lephema, who has since been shuffled to the Trade Ministry, had systematically failed to issue passports, national identity cards, birth certificates, and permits for residency and naturalization in time.

She also found there was unlawful issuance, retention, and misuse of diplomatic passports at the ministry.

“Such documents are not administrative formalities,” Advocate Polaki said.

“They are the legal foundation of individual identity and the mechanism through which constitutionally enshrined rights including freedom of movement, access to employment, healthcare, education, and political participation are exercised,” she said.

“The administrative paralysis documented in this report has subjected citizens and lawful residents to prolonged and profound injustices.”

The investigation was conducted across seven districts, representing 70 percent of the national territory.

“The evidence establishes a clear pattern of maladministration,” she said, citing the absence of strategic foresight, deficient contract management, inadequate digital infrastructure, systematic failure to adhere to the ministry’s own Service Charter.

In the case of diplomatic passports, she said, there was a “deliberate non-enforcement of statutory surrender provisions”.

Most significantly, she said, the evidence reveals executive paralysis by which decisions fundamental to individual rights are delayed without justification, in violation of principles of administrative justice.

She called on the ministry to “restore service dignity, improve processing systems, uphold the rule of law, and ensure the Ministry fulfils its constitutional and statutory obligations to the people of Lesotho”.

Advocate Polaki found that some people had applied for passports from as far back as 2023 and kept going to the ministry to ask if they were out but always went back to their homes emptyhanded, with officials telling them to keep coming.

She also interviewed people who spent nights at the passport offices.

Others, she said, had lost jobs abroad because they had no passports.

“A 35-year-old Mosotho woman applied for a passport in November 2023. More than a year later, she has not received it. She works in South Africa and requires a passport to commute to her job and support her family. The delay has directly undermined her ability to earn a livelihood. She has received no explanation from the Ministry,” she said.

“A 50-year-old Mosotho man applied for a passport in January 2024. He described the collection process as a ‘disaster’, stating he has been repeatedly told to ‘keep checking’ without any indication of when his document will be available,” she said.

She interviewed a woman who applied for an emergency passport, paying the elevated fee of M630 in the hope that her application would be expeditiously processed.

She was also told to ‘keep visiting’, demonstrating that even the emergency channel was non-functional.

Another victim, who applied for a passport in 2024, lives with a physical disability.

“He explained that the physical toll of repeatedly visiting the department to check on his application was immense,” she said.

“He was met with ‘taunts and jibes’ from officers when he sought information – treatment that is unprofessional and constitutes degrading treatment.”

“The accounts from the public present a consistent and distressing picture of administrative failure,” she said.

Staff Reporter

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