

MEDIA RELEASE

Budget Speech: Missed opportunity to adequately capacitated public sector to support economic growth initiatives

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EMBARGO

None

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The Public Servants Association (PSA), representing more than 245 000 public-sector employees, is concerned about government's lack of effort to address capacity of the public sector to support its growth initiatives.

The Minister in his budget speech failed to sufficiently address chronic public service staff shortages and the inability to fill vacancies, which continue to cripple service delivery. Government's acknowledgment of losing 9 000 health workers last year alone reinforces the PSA's longstanding concerns about the devastating impact of persistent budget cuts. Critical government departments face similar constraints, where unfilled vacancies severely affect operations, impacting on the quality-of-service delivery.

Infrastructure development remains a matter of serious concern, as thousands of public servants continue to work in hazardous buildings that pose significant health and safety risks. Government's failure to prioritise safe working environments for its employees is unacceptable. The PSA has repeatedly called on the Department of Public Works and Infrastructure to address this matter by ensuring that government departments operate from state-owned buildings rather than relying on private landlords who neglect maintenance, thus exposing employees and citizens to danger. Even state-owned buildings, however, suffer from neglect owing to inadequate budget allocations, making it difficult to envision any progress in addressing this growing crisis.

The PSA also calls on the Minister to prioritise the disposal or repurposing of hundreds of neglected, dilapidated government-owned houses, which continue to drain state resources. Additionally, the rising accruals by departments must be urgently addressed through adequate resource allocation to prevent further deterioration in service delivery.

Whilst the PSA welcomes National Treasury's intention to address corruption and improve financial efficiency, the lack of consequence management for persons flagged by the Auditor-General continues to send a troubling message that corruption is tolerated. The proposed audit of ghost employees by National Treasury is a reactive measure that would not have been necessarily had proper controls been in place.

The budget allocation of R5 billion to the Department of Defence is a step in the right direction, particularly in view of the challenges that contributed to the recent tragic loss of South African soldiers in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Additionally, struggling workers and the poor were amidst the rising cost of living punished with another VAT increase, which will suffocate their ability to put basic food on the table.

The PSA acknowledges the allocation of R3.5 billion in the current year, with an additional R4 billion over the medium term, to the South African Revenue Service to enhance tax compliance and increase revenue collection. Government must, however, go further by addressing illicit financial flows, recovering funds lost owing to mismanagement as flagged in audit reports, and strengthening border security to prevent the influx of illegal goods such as cigarettes, which significantly impact tax revenue. In addition, law enforcement agencies must be adequately empowered to combat crime and corruption effectively. Businesses are collapsing owing to extortion by criminal groups demanding protection fees, whilst many factories have reduced operating hours owing to safety concerns. These challenges result in job losses, declining tax revenue, and economic stagnation. Failure to urgently address these issues will exacerbate South Africa's economic difficulties and undermine any progress made through budgetary allocations.

There is a sense of relief that government has assured public servants that budget has been set aside to cater for public-sector wage increases that were recently concluded. Whilst the budget includes some positive measures, government must demonstrate the political will to implement real, sustainable solutions.

The PSA urges President Cyril Ramaphosa to decisively play a role as the Chief Executive Officer of the State in addressing these pressing concerns to ensure a functioning public service that benefits employees and the citizens of South Africa. In addition, the President must lead and drive the political will to eradicate fraud, corruption, crime and maladministration.

END