

OR Tambo 'could be conduit for diseases'

There are no screening services available for yellow fever on public holidays or weekends at one of South Africa's main ports of entry, OR Tambo International Airport, as the Gauteng department of health does not have the budget for overtime pay for its staff.

In March, the government sparked a major diplomatic row with Nigeria when it deported 125 Nigerians from OR Tambo with suspected bogus yellow fever certificates. Yellow fever is a haemorrhagic fever transmitted by mosquito bites.

In a written reply to questions from the Democratic Alliance (DA), Gauteng health and social development MEC Hope Papo said disinfection services - spraying visiting aircraft from malaria and yellow-fever endemic countries with insecticides to kill mosquitoes - had been "disrupted" at OR Tambo and at Lanseria International Airport.

The desks where yellow fever certificates were supposed to be inspected had also been "disrupted" at both airports.

"The reasons for the disruptions are shortage of staff and non-payment of overtime and night duty allowances to employees," Papo said.

"The department's employees are refusing to work during weekends and public holidays," he added.

Thermal imagers at OR Tambo, used to detect fevers among passengers, were also out of service because maintenance contracts had not been paid.

DA health spokesman in Gauteng Jack Bloom said yesterday (26 November) the situation was unbelievable. "It's an open door to all manner of illnesses."

Papo did not answer the question on how long these airport health services had been disrupted, but Bloom said he had been reliably informed that it had been since May.

The National Institute for Communicable Diseases outbreak response head Juno Thomas said the lack of health staff at airports was a serious breach of policy.

"It is government policy that persons entering South Africa, who come from a yellow-fever endemic area or are at risk as defined by the World Health Organisation, should either have a certificate or medical waiver before they are allowed to enter," Thomas said.

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