



Gatekeepers | Quit whining and start marketing SA, home affairs minister tells critics, even as biometric queues pile up

CHRIS BARRON

HOME Affairs Minister Malusi Gigaba says the tourism industry must stop bleating about the impact of visa regulations and start marketing South Africa more effectively.

At the same time he says the chaos at OR Tambo airport and other ports of entry as immigration officials struggle to implement the new requirements cannot be expected to end any time soon.

The Tourism Business Council of South Africa told parliament last month that an estimated R7.5-billion had been lost to the economy as a result of would-be tourists being denied entry to South Africa because of the regulations.

It told parliament that 13 246 visitors were turned away while trying to board flights to South Africa in the year to July 2016.

“Visa regulations don’t discourage people from visiting a country,” he says.

One of the strongest critics of the regulations instituted by home affairs has been Gigaba’s cabinet colleague Derek Hanekom, the minister of tourism. But Gigaba is as defiant as ever.

“Visa regulations don’t discourage people from visiting a country,” he says.

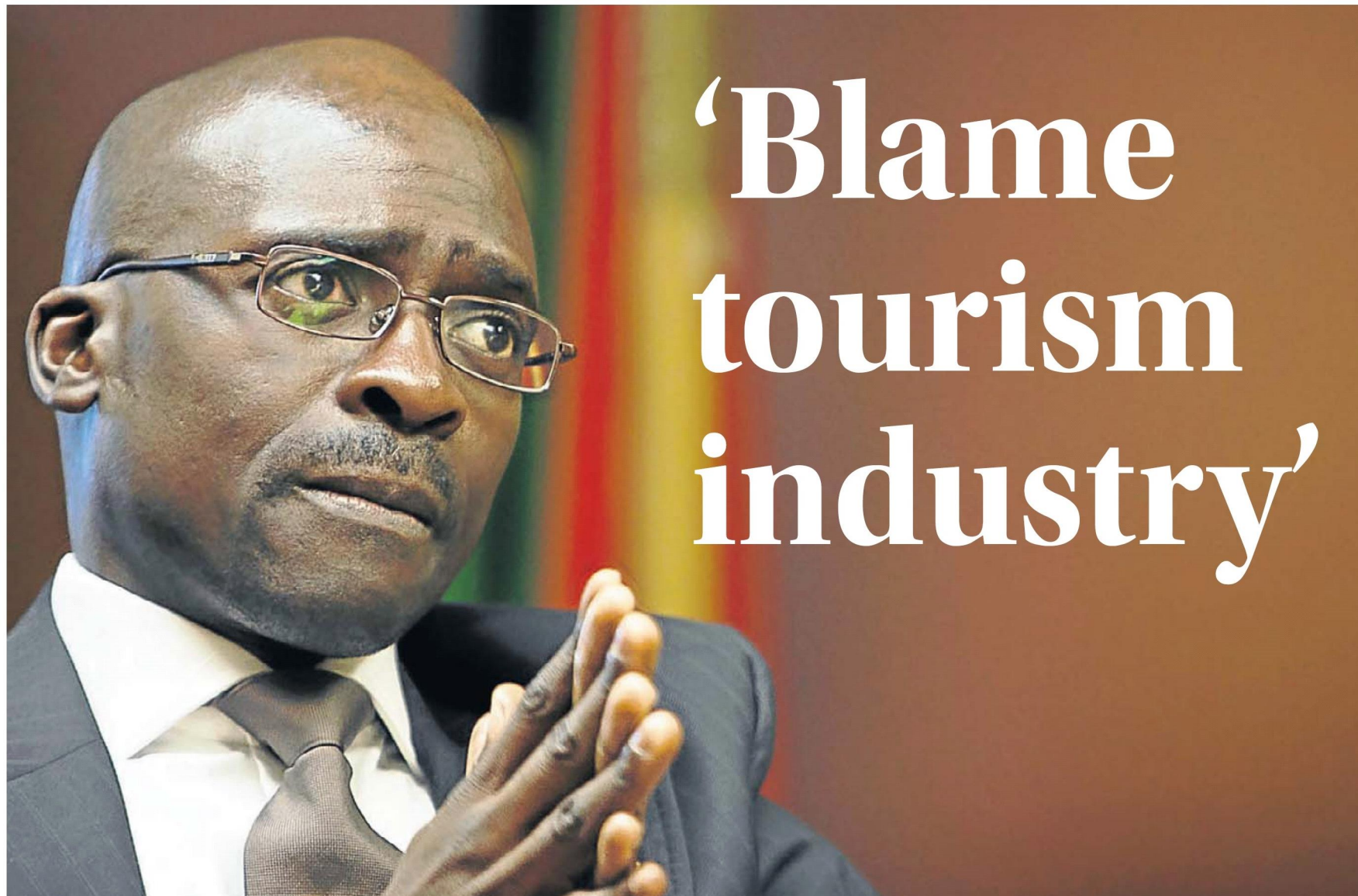
“People go to the US all the time with the stringent visa regulations they have.”

If the tourism industry spent more time and effort promoting the country instead of criticising the visa regulations, tourism might fulfil its potential, he says.

“These regulations are not the most important reason why the tourism industry is not contributing the 20% of GDP they think we have the potential to raise.

“We could have reached that 20% if they’d done their part.”

Major obstacles to tourism which the industry cited were the need for children under 18 to present copies of unabridged birth certificates when entering or leaving South Africa, and the need for visitors to undergo biometric screening at South African missions abroad as part of their visa applications.



HOPE ON HORIZON: Minister of Home Affairs Malusi Gigaba says front-office professionalism has improved through hard work

Picture: LAUREN MULLIGAN

This caused immediate problems because the necessary equipment was not in place.

An interministerial committee chaired by Deputy President Cyril Ramaphosa decided that the capture of visitors’ biometrics would be done at ports of entry instead.

But this has led to chaos at OR Tambo airport. The council told parliament that visitors are waiting in queues at immigration for between one and a half and four hours. Between October 1 and October 18 some 800 passengers missed their connecting flights and 24 domestic and nine international flights were delayed.

Gigaba blames the tourism industry.

“We proposed the pre-screen-

ing of travellers to South Africa in their countries of origin, but this was opposed by the other stakeholders.

“We then said, fine, we will introduce biometric capture at our airports and other ports of entry. But they needed to understand that there are risks related to that. One of the risks is that people will be delayed.”

He is not optimistic about a quick resolution of the problem.

“It will only be in the next two to three years that you will have easier entrance into the country,” he says. And this may only be for frequent travellers to South Africa whose biometrics have already been captured on the system.

So visitors can expect chaos at South Africa’s premier port of

“People go to the US all the time with the stringent visa regulations they have

entry for another three years?

“Well, it’s the unintended consequence of the demand made by the stakeholders.”

Far from getting a sense of urgency from him, it seems he’s almost glad they’re paying for giving him a hard time?

“No, we’re not raising it in that simplistic fashion,” he says. “We are saying there are unintended consequences of the demands that they made.”

The council says the delays are down to Gigaba’s immigration officers not being properly trained to operate the biometric data-capturing technology.

Gigaba concedes that the roll-out of the technology has not been a success “for a variety of reasons”.

The main one is a lack of resources, he says. “The department has historically been underfunded. That impacts on our ability to recruit more staff.”

The council and Airports Company South Africa have reportedly said that they offered the department assistance, but that Home Affairs Director-General Mkuseli Apleni didn’t respond.

“That is inaccurate,” says Gigaba. “The stated intention to

assist was never formalised. The director-general cannot be expected to respond to non-formal discussions and hearsay.

“He can only respond to concrete offers.”

However, his department will be having discussions with Acsa about a possible partnership.

There is little sign of a thaw in his relations with the industry, however.

“The Tourism Business Council has not had a genuine engagement with us,” he says. “They’ve chosen the path of an antagonistic relationship with the department which has made our relations with them quite sour.”

His sharpest critic in the council has been its chairman Mavuso Msimang, who, ironi-

cally, was the home affairs director-general when Gigaba was the deputy minister.

Last year Msimang said the department’s relations with the tourism industry were “completely intransigent”.

When Gigaba accused the industry of lying about the impact of the regulations, Msimang responded that “there must be a really long list of liars, then, starting with the statistician-general and economists who have nothing to do with the industry”.

When Gigaba said — as he did again in this interview — that the industry is simply trying to find excuses for its own poor performance, Msimang retorted that the tourism sector had been performing “above the international average” before the new visa regulations were imposed.

Gigaba says all his department gets from the council is “harsh criticism. We have never received any constructive proposal from the [council] with regard to assistance at the ports of entry.”

Gigaba admits he hasn’t a clue how much the new biometric data-identification technology cost. But, whatever the cost, won’t it be wasted if it doesn’t ease pressure on travellers as intended?

A more important goal is security, he says. “We live in a continent where there are real risks. If any accidents caused by unwanted people were to happen in South Africa then the question would be asked: ‘Why didn’t you take proactive steps?’

“The only way to take proactive steps is to pre-screen the travellers to your country.”

Shouldn’t he have ensured that his department was ready to do it properly?

“The thing to understand is that terrorists and criminals are not waiting for South Africa to have the systems we need in order to ensure smoother travel at our ports of entry.

“They are getting closer and closer and we need to take steps now.”

What about the inconvenience to tourists and business travellers?

“This argument belittles the importance of security. Do you understand the importance of keeping South Africa safe? Can you imagine the impact on the tourism sector if we were to allow any incident to take place? ... There will be no jobs, no tourism industry, if a security

incident happens because we were sleeping.”

He says that when the budget becomes available, the number of counters with biometric identification technology will be increased along with staff increases, and self-operated entry gates will be introduced.

While there is no denying the economic impact of the visa regulations fiasco he unleashed in 2014, it would be unfair to ignore the progress Gigaba has made in other areas. Getting new identity documents and passports is quicker and less painful at many of its offices.

“We’ve been paying a great deal of attention to improving professionalism in our front offices,” he says.

Given the thousands of tourists his visa regulations have alienated, his “philosophy”, which he eagerly expounds, is an interesting one.

“Getting new IDs and passports is quicker and less painful at many of its offices

“Professionalism of service is what turns everybody into an ambassador for the department. It makes everyone realise ‘We are being respected, valued and given good service.’”

Touching, but nowhere in evidence at OR Tambo.

Nor in his last job as minister of public enterprises, where he presided over the collapse of corporate governance at state-owned enterprises such as SAA. His philosophy back then, which he shared in an interview with Business Times before being reshuffled to home affairs, was pretty much the same as the one that has guided his approach to visa regulations, and with similarly damaging consequences: rather too much government than too little.

There must be “more robust oversight” of the board, he said. His interference led to the resignation of the best chairperson SAA had, Cheryl Carolus, along with the most capable board members. And the appointment of Dudu Myeni.

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