

MEDIA RELEASE PSA welcomes South Africa-Zimbabwe Prisoner Transfer Agreement: Warns that overcrowding crisis requires urgent broader reform

DATE 24 August 2026

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The Public Servants Association (PSA), representing thousands of employees at the Department of Correctional Services (DCS), welcomes the recently signed framework and Memorandum of Understanding between the governments of South Africa and Zimbabwe aimed at strengthening cooperation in justice and correctional services.

This included the transfer of sentenced offenders between the two Countries. The agreement is part of broader bilateral cooperation and seeks to establish mechanisms for the interstate transfer of prisoners serving sentences away from their countries of origin. The PSA has consistently raised concerns regarding overcrowding in South African correctional centres and the severe pressure placed on correctional officials who are expected to ensure safe custody, rehabilitation, and security in increasingly constrained working environments. Current prison population figures indicate that South Africa's correctional facilities house more than 170 000 inmates, including a significant number of foreign nationals.

The PSA believes that any initiative that assists in reducing overcrowding, alleviating pressure on correctional facilities, and promoting offender rehabilitation should be considered. Allowing offenders to serve sentences closer to their families and support structures may enhance prospects for successful rehabilitation and reintegration into society whilst reducing some operational pressures on correctional facilities. The PSA, however, cautions that prisoner-transfer agreements should not be viewed as a standalone solution to the challenges in the correctional system. Overcrowding is a consequence of broader systemic challenges, including delays in the criminal justice system, a growing remand-detainee population, infrastructure constraints, and the persistent personnel shortage in correctional facilities.

The successful implementation of the agreement will depend on clear operational procedures, adequate resources, effective intergovernmental coordination, and strict adherence to constitutional and human-rights obligations. Correctional officials must be fully supported and consulted regarding any operational changes that may arise from the implementation of such agreements. Continued regional cooperation in the Southern African Development Community framework is welcomed, particularly where this contributes to improved correctional management, information sharing, rehabilitation programmes, and institutional capacity-building.

The PSA is committed to advocating for safer correctional centres, improved working conditions for correctional officials, sufficient staffing levels, and policies that support public safety and meaningful offender rehabilitation.

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