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LCCI Calls for Urgent Institutional Reform of Immigration Governance to Counter Rising Human Trafficking and Protect Regional Socio-Economic Stability in Africa

POLOKWANE, LIMPOPO — The Limpopo Chamber of Commerce and Industry (LCCI) views with grave concern the escalating tensions arising from anti-illegal-immigration protests, which expose deep institutional vulnerabilities in South Africa's and Africa's population and immigration-management systems. These vulnerabilities are undermining national security, regional economies, lawful trade, community stability and human dignity.

South Africa is affected in at least three economic ways. First, opportunities that should have supported lawful employment, youth entry, township enterprise and local business development may have been diverted through corrupt access, undocumented labour, fraudulent documentation and informal non-compliance. Second, compliant South African businesses have had to compete against operators who may have benefited from cheap vulnerable labour, non-payment of taxes, weak regulation and unfair pricing. Third, the resulting unrest now disrupts business operations, creates pressure on labour availability, destabilises supply chains and damages Brand South Africa, investor confidence, tourism sentiment and the safety of South African businesses operating elsewhere on the continent.

Given the existence of funded departments, border agencies, immigration systems, labour inspectors, police structures and regional diplomatic mechanisms, the scale and persistence of this crisis can no longer be treated as ordinary administrative weakness. LCCI submits that the evidence of organised corruption in the immigration system warrants a full investigation into whether the current crisis was enabled by negligence, corruption, criminal facilitation, deliberate institutional weakening or actors who benefited from unlawful migration, document fraud and labour exploitation.

This matter must also be understood from the perspective of undocumented migrants as victims of the same breakdown. People who entered or remained in South Africa through corrupt documentation systems, false promises, labour exploitation, weak border controls or criminal facilitation may now face deportation, family disruption, violence, trafficking risks and loss of livelihood.

The concern that this crisis may have been enabled by more than incompetence is supported by the findings of the Special Investigating Unit (SIU). The SIU reported that South Africa's immigration system had been treated as "a marketplace", where permits and visas were sold to the highest bidder. Its investigation, authorised under Proclamation 154 of 2004 and covering the period 2004 to 2024, found evidence of corrupt officials, fraudulent documentation, payments to officials and financial gains exceeding R181 million linked to beneficiaries of fraudulent visa applications. Four officials earning less than R25,000 per month allegedly received R16.313 million in direct deposits.

The Chamber is particularly concerned that institutional failure across countries of origin, transit and destination has created a dangerous traceability gap. When countries of origin fail to account for the movement, documentation, protection and reintegration of their citizens, and South Africa fails to maintain strict entry, exit, identity and status accountability at its borders, a structural vacuum is created. This lack of traceability affects local socio-economies, undermines regional integration and the implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area, and leaves children and vulnerable populations exposed to trafficking, forced labour, false recruitment and exploitation.

This is an African governance problem, not only a South African immigration problem. Population management, lawful mobility, citizen documentation, consular protection and reintegration are essential to socio-economic planning. AfCFTA cannot succeed where countries cannot account for the

lawful movement, safety, skills and economic participation of their people. Trade integration requires trusted borders, reliable identity systems, lawful labour mobility and accountable institutions.

Recent operational reports from the Border Management Authority (BMA) confirm the seriousness of this risk. During the 2025/2026 festive season, the BMA reported the discovery of approximately 53 unaccompanied minors at the Beitbridge Port of Entry, some as young as three years old. The BMA also reported the interception of a Mozambican national who allegedly attempted to smuggle a South African child, later confirmed as missing from Johannesburg, to Mozambique. These incidents point to serious people-movement vulnerabilities requiring urgent regional investigation and coordinated response.

The human-trafficking risk must therefore be treated as a national and regional priority. The United States placed South Africa on the 2025 Tier 2 Watch List for human trafficking, citing reduced victim identification, fewer investigations and fewer prosecutions. The 2025 Trafficking in Persons Report recorded that South Africa reported investigating 13 trafficking cases, compared with 156 in the previous reporting period.

"A regional economy cannot thrive in an environment of institutional lawlessness," says the LCCI President. "Porous borders do not only facilitate illegal migration; they create an unregulated underground economy where criminal networks, unlawful labour practices, tax leakage, customs leakage and unfair competition can flourish. This destabilises local labour markets, compromises community safety, and places an unsustainable operational burden on social development and law-enforcement infrastructure."

The absence of a verified undocumented-migrant count does not mean the risk is small. It means the country is planning blindly. Home Affairs reported 109,344 deportations over two financial years, including 51,560 in 2024/25 and 57,784 in 2025/26. President Ramaphosa also stated that the BMA intercepted and stopped over 450,000 people attempting to enter South Africa illegally in the past year. These are not population counts. They are pressure indicators showing that the country is dealing with a measurable governance and planning risk.

If approximately 450,000 to 500,000 attempted irregular entries are stopped over a given period, the planning question becomes: what proportion of attempted irregular entry is actually detected? At a 75% detection assumption, the same pressure indicator could imply approximately 150,000 to 167,000 successful irregular entries. At 50%, the implied number could be approximately 450,000 to 500,000. At 25%, the implied exposure rises to approximately 1.35 million to 1.5 million. At 20%, the exposure could approach 1.8 million to 2 million. These are planning scenarios, and they show why a national migration audit is urgent.

The labour-market dimension is equally important. Stats SA's QLFS 2022 migration report shows that among people aged 15–64, approximately 1.397 million immigrants were employed out of a working-age immigrant population of 2.182 million. That is an employment-to-population ratio of about 64.0%, compared with approximately 34.9% for non-migrants and 54.8% for internal migrants. This does not prove that migrants caused unemployment, but it does show a labour-market absorption pattern requiring employer-compliance audits, labour inspections, immigration-status verification and youth-placement interventions.

National Treasury projects real GDP growth of only 1.6% in 2026, meaning even modest disruption to labour supply, informal trading networks, agriculture, logistics, construction, retail or consumer confidence can have broader economic consequences.

LCCI therefore calls for South Africa, the African Union, SADC and countries of origin, transit and destination to look beyond immigration enforcement alone. The urgent task is to investigate corruption, identify beneficiaries, restore institutional accountability and put systems in place that protect South Africans, lawful businesses, migrants, children and vulnerable persons.

LCCI calls for four urgent interventions:

1. **Investigate the breakdown, corruption networks and beneficiaries:** South Africa must investigate whether the migration governance crisis resulted from negligence, corruption, organised criminal facilitation, deliberate institutional weakening or actors who benefited from undocumented migration, document fraud, trafficking risks, cheap labour, tax leakage and labour exploitation.
2. **Conduct a national migration audit and economic-impact assessment:** Government must establish a verified picture of citizens, documented migrants, asylum seekers, overstayers and undocumented persons, and assess the impact on labour markets, township economies, municipal services, business continuity, regional trade and vulnerable sectors.
3. **Establish AU and SADC regional accountability:** Countries of origin, transit and destination must account for citizen movement, documentation, consular protection, reintegration, anti-trafficking cooperation, recruitment systems and missing-person risks.
4. **Implement a managed transition to lawful economic participation:** South Africa must strengthen border integrity, labour inspections, employer compliance and anti-corruption enforcement while protecting food systems, construction, township trade, logistics, household services and small-business supply chains from unmanaged disruption.

When migration governance collapses, the cost is paid by undocumented migrants who suffer exploitation and displacement, South African communities who face instability and lost opportunity, lawful businesses whose competitiveness is undermined, and Africa's development prospects as a whole. LCCI stands ready to partner with state organs and regional institutions to restore structural integrity, protect communities and ensure that the regional economy is built on law, accountability and human traceability.

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