

**Untenable economic and political circumstances in their own countries of birth deliver desperate foreign nationals to South Africa's borders on a daily basis. They arrive in South Africa with no identity, forge new ones and assume the status of 'newborns'. Who are the Home Affairs newborns and where will they end up? By BHEKI C. SIMELANE.**

South Africa became one of the fastest-developing African countries after attaining democracy, which made it a preferred destination for millions of job-seeking foreign nationals. But in order to get jobs, they first needed South African identities.

The imagination does not have to stretch too far: creating a South African identity requires some illegal assistance and a little corruption from Home Affairs officials. And once one has a South African identity, landing a job becomes a possibility.

Sindi Gumbo, (not his real name) a 55-year-old Zimbabwean national, says she entered South Africa illegally for the first time in 2012. She did so in order to create a South African identity that would make her eligible for a South African Old Age Grant. "I'm well aware that what I'm doing is illegal," she says. "I was assisted through the process of obtaining a South African ID by a middle-aged man who seemed to ease in and out of a Johannesburg Home Affairs as if it were his own personal property. I just sat around and he did most of the running around for his R5,000 service."

According to Gumbo, the only time she was actively involved in the ID procurement process was when she was called to fill in a few details and leave fingerprints.

A 42-year-old Soweto man who, for obvious reasons, did not supply his full details, admitted to helping facilitate the process that equips foreign nationals with South African ID documents. "Lanky", as he is known, presumably for his tall and skinny frame, says he has assisted hundreds of clients in obtaining South African IDs. He says he charges R5,000 for his services, and that he is well aware that it is illegal. "But I have to continue because I arrived from the Eastern Cape a few years ago, and things haven't been easy. What's an unemployed guy like me to do? It's easier to agree to help than to refuse. I need the money, and having Home Affairs officials on board the ID scam makes my life much easier."

Lanky says he does not assist "just any" foreign national to get a South African ID. "My clients go through an interview conducted by myself. I interview and make them aware of the advantages they seek as well as disadvantages they may simply ignore. I also do not entertain clients under the age of 18 because I believe that anyone 18 and above should understand the nature and repercussions of the task before they commit themselves.

"I divulge the disadvantages to my clients and leave it to them to make the final decision of whether or not they still want to go through with the process. Then, with the help of Home Affairs officials, we set the process in motion."

Lanky says financial gain and his clients' desperation are what push him to commit identity fraud. "I do not just do it for the money, but I also consider my clients' circumstances. You must understand that no matter how old my clients are, we help them obtain South African identity, from which they assume the status of newborns – and they will have no link to their country. That could present all sorts of problems should such a person die, because issues might arise that they have to be repatriated when they possess South African identities. It might take very long to get them buried should they die in this country, because their families will want them to be buried at their places of birth, yet they possess South African identities. This is why I take time to explain to my clients to make them aware of this eventuality."

Still, the business remains a lucrative one. Liesel Smith, a 32-year-old Zimbabwean, (not her real name) says: "I was shocked at the amount of money the women involved in the scandal were counting. I thought I was the only one, but discovered that thousands of us had been promised and made to pay R5,000 per person."

Smith says when she finally arrived at Johannesburg Home Affairs, she had high hopes of obtaining her own South African identity, but she and a few others she called a few months later had been granted fake South African identity documents. She obtained her fake ID with the help of several contacts from South Africa and Zimbabwe. "I paid R5,000 in cash to obtain the fake ID. What surprised me most was how such shady business could be conducted from the Home Affairs premises and that all thousands of us had been conned by the ID fraud syndicate and the South African Home Affairs."

Smith would not say what she planned to do with the fake ID. Her ID is an alarming light green, nothing like the dark green South African ID. While many foreign nationals receive legitimate South African IDs through shady means, she, on the other hand, was unlucky to be handed a fake one which can be recognised as such from a mile away.

Lanky admits the ID scheme is operated from a Home Affairs office. He says he cannot recall how many thousands he has assisted in obtaining an SA identity. "I have been doing this for some time, but have been actively involved for the past five years. I understand the complications, costs and other strains to the South African government, but I have no choice. If Home Affairs officials who earn a monthly salary do it, so will I."

Asked if he intended going on assisting foreign nationals obtain South African identities with the help of Home Affairs officials, Lanky said he wished he had a choice. "I will continue for as long as my Home Affairs contacts' purses stay bottomless. However, should the partnership collapse, I'll have to opt out, lest things get messy. I'd like to quit while I'm still ahead, though, for the sake of the country. This is hurting South Africa anyway, and it's got to stop."

On the other hand, Smith laments ever getting in contact with a Zimbabwean woman who linked her up with the ID fraud syndicate, because she ended up with no real ID and no money. “I regret ever putting my trust in those people. I wouldn’t have had a problem if they had issued me the authentic document, even though I know I’d still be illegal. I’m a teacher by profession; I taught in my own country for several years before attempting to get South African identity, so that I could look for a teaching post in South Africa, but my pursuit of greener pastures has kept me iced.”

As suspicious goings-on continue to unfold at Home Affairs, Lanky’s words that ID fraud will present all sorts of problems echo. Not only will South Africa suffer; so will the ID seeker’s own country and family. Lanky envisaged a complex set of problems should the ID holder die in South Africa. There will need to be a death certificate, which will require the blood relatives and not the South African families ID seekers are attached to, in order to acquire legitimacy.

“It’s their choice, but some of us are open and honest to our clients. As for myself, I make them aware of the dangers, then leave it to them to decide if they want to go on. But you often find death is the last thing on their minds; landing a job the first.” **DM**