

DNA law delay knocks 'fight against crime'

MICHAEL BLEBY

Writer at Large

PARLIAMENT's failure this week to finalise a proposed law that would establish an extensive DNA profiling system put back the fight against violent crime and could mean a new committee convened to scrutinise the bill would need to start again from scratch after the April 22 election, a campaigner pushing the bill said yesterday.

The ad hoc committee scrutinising the Criminal Law (Forensic Procedures) Amendment Bill decided on Monday to adjourn its discussions and leave the finalisation of the legislation to a new committee to be formed in the next Parliament.

The proposed law would expand police databases — containing about 120 000 DNA profiles — to include those of all prisoners and, subsequently, those of all people arrested.

The committee's failure to finalise the legislation, citing questions about implementation of the bill and its constitutionality, took it beyond the

normal bounds of committee responsibility, said Vanessa Lynch, executive director of The DNA Project, a Cape Town-based nonprofit organisation campaigning for the creation of a DNA profiling system.

"It's unfortunate and unusual that the portfolio committee took on the responsibility of an implementation plan," Lynch said at a media briefing yesterday. "The new committee will have to select new members. If they're not the same, we will have to start from scratch."

At stake is the creation of a vastly expanded and better resourced database that would eventually contain DNA profiles of anyone arrested in SA, whether or not they were charged, convicted or acquitted.

The database would be used to match evidence found at crime scenes against listed profiles and identify perpetrators of crimes with an accuracy not possible at present.

An equivalent system in operation in the UK contains the DNA profiles of 5% of the population.

blebym@bdfm.co.za