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A NEW crime-busting Bill approved by cabinet last week would give police access to a fingerprints database of millions of South Africans through the Department of Home Affairs' fingerprint database and the Department of Transport's e-NATIS system.

This is all part of Government's crime fighting initiative, which would see more than R5 billion ploughed into strengthening the SAPS's forensic capacity to collect, store and use fingerprint and DNA evidence in their fight against crime, deputy justice minister Johnny de Lange said yesterday.

If the Bill is passed by parliament, the SAPS would gain access to the Department of Home Affairs' fingerprint database, containing 31 million fingerprints of citizens and about 2.5 million taken from foreigners.

It would also allow police to use the Department of Transport's e-NATIS system, in which a further six million thumb-prints are stored.

Money would be spent on a DNA database which would contain blood samples from convicted criminals and would be used as a tool to solve crimes.

It is envisaged that the linking of databases from different government departments will give police greater access to information and transform the way police conduct their investigations.

Cabinet last week approved the draft Criminal Law (Forensic Procedures) Amendment Bill, which is aimed at improving the capacity of police to track down suspects and boosting conviction rates.

The Bill, which will come before parliament next year, will give the SAPS the power to take and store fingerprints and DNA samples in a national database to be used to track criminals.

De Lange said billions more rands would be used to establish a DNA database, which would contain blood samples from convicted criminals and would also be used as a tool to solve crimes.

Massive

De Lange said present methods used by the SAPS to investigate crime scenes were "outdated" and that the country's criminal justice system was 10 years behind international standards.

"The problem we have with the criminal justice system is that although it is there and it has been working for a while, the system works in such a way that the results (for convictions) are completely unacceptable. We have huge numbers of undetected criminals.

"I don't think we are running ahead of ourselves I think we are far behind.

"On every single issue in our criminal justice system we are at least 10 years behind because we haven't done these things. I mean, these are big gaps and not one of

the opposition parties, the media or government picked this up, the extent of our problem and what we are facing in this country.

"Now we are doing it and I think we are behind on all fronts. That's why I am so happy that cabinet agreed that this Bill should go (to parliament)," said De Lange, who was appointed by former president Thabo Mbeki to head the review of the country's criminal justice system.

"We have 19 000 murder cases year and if you ask me what happened to murder cases that happened two years ago I can't tell you. The (justice) minister (Enver Surt) can't tell you. No policemen can tell you, no prosecutor can tell you. No one in this country can tell you why? Why?"

"Because each little unit has its own collection of information and most of it is done manually. There's no link. By linking this information into a database we can tell you where the answer to your question is. In the future when you put in a murder for all the murders this year it will tell you exactly through the system where that case is and what happened to it," De Lange said.

He said the Bill would "empower" police to lift fingerprints and DNA evidence at crime scenes and check them against the databases.

At present the SAPS has access only to its own database, as by law the details of people not convicted of crimes must be destroyed.

Bill adds punch to crime war 32 million fingerprints for police database