

Prasa endeavours to improve train services

The Passenger Rail Agency of South Africa (Prasa) has affirmed its commitment to improve reliability and on-time performance, while providing long-distance services that cater to the majority of South Africans who come from low income households.



Source: Col André Kritzinger via [Wikimedia Commons](#)

This comes after an article by the Sunday Times on the agency's deal to lease diesel locomotives for the long distance train service and operational matters in relation to the Mainline Passenger Service (MLPS), which experienced several challenges and disruptions.

"[The] MLPS endeavours to improve its services and reliability because failure to render this social service is not an option," Prasa said on Monday.

Regarding the matter of the leasing of the diesel locomotives, in May 2021, PRASA approached the National Treasury to apply for a deviation in the leasing of locomotives needed to run the long-distance rail service.

"A list of six companies was sent to National Treasury. National Treasury approved the deviation on condition that Prasa goes out on a close bidding process to all six bidders who submitted proposals in the previous procurement process while Prasa issued a new bidding process because of the urgency to continue running the service.

"In October 2021, a letter of appointment of Premifield was signed by then Group CEO Zolani Matthews for the leasing of seven Diesel Locomotives for 11 months. It is incorrect to suggest that the appointment letter was signed days after he had left as suggested in the Sunday Times," Prasa said.

The article also states that the contract value is R130 million suggesting that the December service cost the company R130m.

Prasa said this was not the case as it is still waiting for invoices for the festive season service.

"It is premature at this stage to state exactly how much was spent on the leasing of the locomotives. It is also not true that MLPS is stuck with locomotives it cannot use. The service will continue with the next trip to the Eastern Cape scheduled for this Friday, 28 January 2022," Prasa said.

Operational matters

The MLPS resumed its Shosholoza Meyl long-distance train service on 15 December 2021, just in time for the Christmas holiday peak from Johannesburg to East London and Johannesburg to Gqeberha, up and down.

"It must be noted that no train service operated to Cape Town as suggested by the Sunday Times article. The article quoted Zak Benjamin, who travelled with his ailing mother to Cape Town.

"While we are in no position to comment on his experience of the service, we can categorically state that there was no train service to Cape Town during the festive season," Prasa said.

The agency said while the service in December had a good start, the trains experienced several challenges and disruptions on the route, most of which were beyond the control of MLPS.

Some of the challenges included train delays for about 6 to 8 hours, with most trains taking more than 24 hours to reach their destinations, resulting in trips completed by buses at no cost to the passengers.

"It must be noted that a train trip to Johannesburg to East London takes 18 hours, while a train trip to Gqeberha is 19 and half hours. The delays were caused by the continuous theft and vandalism of overhead cables and faulty signalling because of theft and vandalism leaving the trains to be controlled manually.

"This, unfortunately, meant more time was needed for information to be processed before any movement could be allowed," Prasa said.

According to Prasa, the Eastern Cape route operates on Transnet lines and the responsibility for ensuring that lines are operational lies with Transnet.

"The Transnet lines which Shosholoza Meyl operated on were also affected by theft and vandalism. Transnet has committed to restoring the vandalised infrastructure on their lines. However, the theft and vandalism of infrastructure is a huge country issue that affects not only Prasa and Transnet but other state entities," Prasa said.

The agency said while passengers were inconvenienced and frustrated by the train delays, the bus service that was offered as a contingency plan was welcomed as this was still better than the thousands of rands they were accustomed to spending on bus and taxi fares.

"Despite these challenges, MLPS continued providing the service to its customers because of the demand for a low-cost, affordable long-distance travel service during the December and January peak period.

"In its decision to continue running the service Prasa heard the plight of the working-class passengers burdened by the high cost of long-distance bus and taxi travel.

"Cancelling the service was therefore not an option because Prasa has a mandate to provide a long-distance service, considered a social service that caters to the majority of South Africans who come from low-income households," Prasa said.

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