

7.6% INCREASE RECORDED

Foreign arrivals up this year

Vuyo Mkize

DESPITE concerns that South Africa's amended visa regulations would cause a slump in tourist arrivals, the Department of Home Affairs recorded a 7.6% increase in foreign arrivals over the festive season.

Home Affairs Minister Malusi Gigaba appeared triumphant at a press briefing yesterday where he shared the country's latest travel statistics for the December 1, 2015 to January 7, 2016 period.

According to the figures, more than 5.3 million people travelled through the country's border posts – arrivals and departures. Of that number, more than 3.9 million were foreigners and more than 1.4 million were citizens.

Total movement for previous years such as December 1, 2013 to January 7, 2014 was 5 141 021, while the figure stood at 5 116 1783 for December 1, 2014 to January 7, 2015.

Gigaba conceded that there had been a "slight drop" in the previous year but said it was attributable to the introduction of the amended visa regulations at the time, when people had been "grappling" with them.

The latest statistical period has seen more than 2.7 million foreigners travel into the country, a leap from the 2014/15

period where more than 1.8 million foreigners arrived. "With regard to travelling minors, 284 191 foreign minors travelled to South Africa. Only 0.6% of foreign minors were turned back due to lack of compliance with requirements for travelling minors," he said.

Gigaba said while focus was always on European travellers, year on year, the country experienced the highest number of arrivals from other African countries. "The top nationalities arriving in South Africa over this period were from Lesotho, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Swaziland, Botswana, the UK, Germany, the US and Namibia," he said.

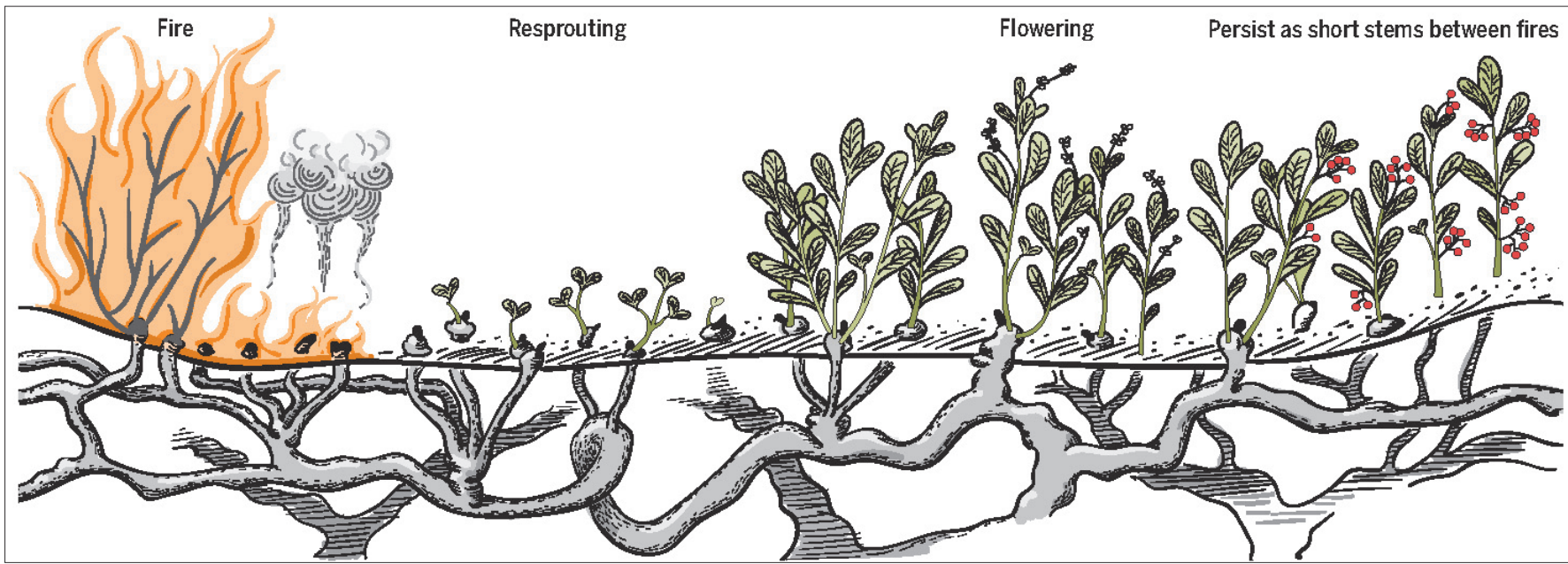
Topping the top 10 points of entry and departure were OR Tambo International Airport, Beit Bridge, Lebombo, Maseru Bridge and Ficksburg.

Gigaba said: "Our country can balance the national interests of national security and child safety with tourism. We can be a safe and convenient country to travel to, and we believe the immigration concessions do exactly that... we should be ready soon to report on the strong advisory in respect of children from visa-exempt countries."

He thanked travellers and citizens for their conduct over the period, in spite of challenges. He also thanked immigration officials, who kept order at the ports.



GIGABA



To survive the scorching heat and destruction of regular fires on the African savannah, some trees have developed underground storage organs that allow them to regenerate quickly once the flames have passed. They include 'underground trees' with massive branches below ground level, with short stems and leaves that resprout after a fire.

SOURCE: SCIENCEMAG.ORG

Reforestation needs a rethink, says botany prof

Tony Carnie

A RICH reservoir of plant and animal species – including strange trees that grow almost completely underground – could be under threat from global plans to suck up carbon emissions by growing new tree plantations.

Writing in the latest issue of the international journal Science, University of Cape Town botany professor William J Bond says grasslands are often seen as sterile or "degraded" landscapes shaped by centuries of deforestation or fires lit by humans.

However, recent research suggests that many grassland

environments have much more ancient origins, predating human deforestation and fire-management by millions of years.

Because grassland ecosystems were highly flammable, several plant and animal species had evolved strategies to survive the devastating heat and flames caused by lightning and other naturally induced fires.

Examples include the peculiar "underground trees" of Africa and South America that have massive branches that grow beneath the soil.

With their main branches protected from surface fires, the trees are able to sprout new

stems and leaves rapidly after a fire.

These "underground trees" (known as geoxylic suffrutices) also have close relatives in Africa that originated between 6 million and 2.5 millions years ago – predating human deforestation by millions of years.

Other plants had also developed fire-survival strategies such as thick bark or underground storage organs that resprout rapidly after the fire burns out.

More recently, said Bond, concern about the rapid rate of deforestation in many parts of the world had spurred efforts to identify suitable land for reforestation.

The World Resources Institute had also developed a map linked to global plans to "reforest" degraded lands to offset the rising levels of human-induced carbon dioxide emissions.

"The immediate target is the reforestation of 1.5 million square kilometres by 2020. Vast areas of open grassy vegetation have been identified as suitable for reforestation. But are all these grasslands products of deforestation?" asked Bond, who is also chief scientist of the South African Environmental Observation Network.

He argued that the rich biological variety of grasslands had been ignored by many re-

searchers until quite recently, partly because of myths and misconceptions that fires could only be started by humans.

Far from being sterile or degraded, grasslands were often biodiversity "hot spots" and there were several unanswered questions about the origin, function and age of grassland areas.

In South Africa, grassland biomes supported nearly 3 800 different plant species. In North America, grasslands supported nearly one third of the total plant species.

"It would be a travesty if ancient grasslands are replaced with ill-conceived forest plantation projects

ANC discusses sex claims

Zodidi Dano

WESTERN Cape ANC officials sat yesterday to discuss sexual harassment allegations made against provincial chairman Marius Fransman although no decision was made on whether to suspend him or not.

The party's provincial spokesman, Jabu Mfusi, said yesterday's meeting was the first official one of the year. The sexual harassment allegations were on the agenda along with other issues including education and the ANC rally to take place on Saturday.

Mfusi said: "This is the first time we are meeting organisationally as officials to hear comrade Marius's side as to what transpired during that period."

He said the party's top officials were not in a position to suspend Fransman. However, they were able to charge him.

"Top officials can't do anything really; the only power they have is to charge a person. Only the provincial executive committee and the full structure can take such a decision."

The Western Cape provincial executive is still to set a date for a meeting to discuss the sexual harassment allegations – that Fransman sexually assaulted a 20-year-old employee on the way to the party's 10th birthday celebrations last week, which emerged last Friday.

Reports suggested that the woman, who had been working at a wine estate, was offered a job by Fransman as his personal assistant and hired two days before his trip to Rustenburg ahead of the ANC birthday celebrations.

A Sunday newspaper disclosed information purporting to be from the docket which stated that the first incident of alleged sexual harassment happened in the car on the way to the venue.

The second allegedly happened in a hotel room in Kimberley.

Yesterday Fransman, who attended the top officials' meeting held at Sahara House, did not comment on the allegations. But on Sunday, he told the Cape Argus there were allegations that he had offered the woman a R50 000 bribe to keep quiet.

69 landslide bodies found

SHENZHEN: A total of 69 bodies have been found as of yesterday from the Shenzhen landslide, with another eight people remaining unaccounted for, the rescue headquarters said.

Six injured people are still being treated in hospital. Authorities have identified 31 criminal suspects responsible for the landslide.

Police have arrested 16 and detained another nine, while six others are still at large.

The landslide occurred when a mountain of construction waste collapsed and buried several buildings in the southern Chinese city – Xinhua

New York to launch special court to deal with guns

NEW YORK: Officials will announce a sweeping effort to combat gun violence in New York today by convening a new court in Brooklyn dedicated to handling gun possession cases while also creating a police unit to focus exclusively on gun cases.

People charged with illegally possessing firearms in Brooklyn, which has the highest rate of such cases among the city's five boroughs, would be processed through one of the two courts, the office of mayor Bill de Blasio said.

The courts would be overseen by two state judges with a support staff to include retired judges who helped oversee pre-trial hearings, part of an effort to streamline the adjudication of such cases.

The goal was to resolve the majority of those cases within

six months of arrest. New York State has some of the country's toughest gun laws, but law enforcement officials have struggled to stem the so-called "Iron Pipeline," in which illegal firearms flow in from southern states with looser restrictions.

The new gun courts are the second time the city has tried to dedicate a particular courtroom to gun cases. In 2003, the court system launched a gun court in Brooklyn with a dedicated judge.

The court had initial successes, but it eventually became overloaded with a backlog of cases, partly because of a change in state law that increased the minimum sentence for gun possession charges, making plea deals less likely.

Court officials suspended the court in 2009. – Reuters

Striking workers storm varsity campuses

Rapula Moatsho and Carlo Petersen

STRIKING university general workers in Pretoria heeded a call by their leaders to "make the situation messy" by storming into the University of Pretoria and Unisa and disrupting student registration yesterday.

But at Tuks the workers were met by trigger-happy police officers and soon found themselves stumbling on the tarmac among stun grenades and tear gas that had been fired at them.

Hundreds of workers, under the banner of the #OutsourcingMustFall campaign, had marched into the campus entrance at the corner of Festival and Prospect streets.

Police acted swiftly and used the stun grenades to force them out of the university property.

Three workers sustained minor injuries on the head and back. Some were arrested.

The workers, some of whom had staged a night vigil outside the campus, continued to sing while on the run after police had fired the stun grenades.

University spokeswoman Anna-Retha

Bouwer said the management took a decision to close down the campus because of the unrest.

The mass action started on Monday when outsourced workers shut down the Unisa campus demanding permanent employment.

It continued at the university yesterday when the striking workers first derailed the registration process in the Sunnyside campus before instructing administrative workers to stop working.

By late morning, the strikers congregated at Burgers Park in the city centre to listen to leaders of the campaign, who told them to make "the situation messy" as the strike entered its second day.

Threatened

From there, the workers went to Unisa where they threatened staff, telling them to leave their offices or face the consequences. Police kept watch as Unisa staff members walked off the campus.

The strikers were hoisting placards bearing the messages expressing their demand to be hired directly by the universities and to be paid R10 000. General workers are employed by private companies hired by both universities.

Having succeeded in forcing Unisa staff to leave their work stations, the strikers proceeded to Tuks.

Unisa spokesman Martin Ramotshela repeated the standpoint of the university that a task team led by Dr Somadoda Fikeni had been appointed to look into issues raised by the workers.

"The bottom line is that we will conclude the process within six months. Anyone suggesting that there is no progress is being economical with the truth," he said.

Meanwhile, universities in the Western Cape are not taking any chances. They have all contracted heavily armed security firms before thousands of students return for the 2016 academic year.

Last year millions of rands in damage was caused during #FeesMustFall protests.

Stellenbosch University says beefing up security was not just a management decision but was also "aligned with a directive from government".

The University of the Western Cape estimates that repairs will cost at least R20 million, and the Cape Peninsula University of Technology has put its costs at more than R10 million. The University of Cape Town and Stellenbosch say they are still assessing the damage.

Last week the universities said they would not tolerate violent protests.

Yesterday students from all four institutions said there was a strong security presence on their campuses.

Students, guards cry foul after clash

Shain Germaner

YESTERDAY'S altercation between protesting students and private security guards at Wits University that left four of the guards with minor injuries has both sides crying foul.

Students claim they were manhandled and bruised by overzealous security guards following an overnight picket, while the guards accuse students of striking first, using steel dustbins, sticks, chairs, bottles, bricks and other objects to fight off the eviction from the picket area.

As part of the #FeesMustFall movement, a group of about 15 to 20 students occupied Solomon Mahlangu House on Monday night.

This was part of the movement's ongoing protest to secure free tertiary education for poor students and fight against registration fees and financial exclusion.

According to one student, who elected not to be named for safety reasons, security members began reading out a notice from the deputy vice-chancellor for transformation, human resources and advancement, Tawana Kupe, saying they had five minutes to vacate the building.

The student said the security guards insisted they sign the notice, but the group said they would not move.

A few minutes later, the security team returned with back-up, and "suddenly be-

came aggressive".

"We tried to explain why we were there. We were not there to fight. Out of the blue, and I honestly mean this, out of the blue, they became aggressive," she said.

The student said she was fondled and throttled as the guards tried to drag her out of the building, while one of her peers was undressed and her breasts were touched in the process.

When asked about the injuries sustained by the security guards, the student said: "If this means that for us to fight for our rights that blood will be shed, it will be shed."

Meanwhile, a fellow student, Tshepiso Mofu, said: "If someone pushes you, undresses you and touches your boobs, you can't not react."

The security guards, of Fidelity Security Services, told a different story, saying they were forced to call for back-up after students attacked them while they were trying to move them from the building.

Sitting in a Joburg Emergency Services ambulance, nursing a battered knee and bleeding arm, security guard José Pintar said there was no negotiation between guards and students before the violence flared.

His colleague, Thulani Hlongwane, was hit on the head with a bottle, and said two more of his colleagues had been injured while they tried to hold back the students.

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Bronze Age relics the best found yet

LONDON: Archaeologists said yesterday that they had discovered what were believed to be the best-preserved Bronze Age dwellings found in Britain, providing an extraordinary insight into prehistoric life from 3 000 years ago.

The settlement of large circular wooden houses, built on stilts, collapsed in a fire and plunged into a river where it was preserved in silts – leaving it in pristine condition, Historic England said.

Discoveries from the dwellings in Whittlesey, in central England, which archaeologists said had been frozen in time and dated from between 1000-800 BC, included pots with food inside and finely woven clothing. "We are learning more about the food our ancestors ate, and the pottery they used to cook and serve it," said Duncan Wilson, the chief executive of Historic England.

Among the finds at the site, about 2m below the modern ground surface, are exotic glass beads forming part of a necklace, rare small cups, bowls and jars. Archaeologists also said that even the footprints of those who had lived there had been found. There were also charred roof timbers visible in one of the houses, and the excavation team speculated that those at the settlement abandoned it when it caught fire.

David Gibson, the archaeological manager at the Cambridge archaeological unit, said they usually came across only a few finds at Bronze Age sites.

"This time so much more has been preserved," he said. – Reuters