

Court Staffing Crisis Looms

BY SHARIKA REGCHAND

The Pietermaritzburg District Court has the highest number of unfinished case in the province and a looming staffing crisis is expected to close three courts from next week,

Chief Magistrate Sibaba Ngcobo said that on a national level, the court stands fourth from bottom for unfinalised cases.

The staff crisis comes about because three district prosecutors are moving to the regional court to replace three prosecutors who are moving to the Directorate of Public Prosecutions.

Ngcobo said he has written to provincial Director of Public Prosecutions Shamila Batohi and National Director Vusi Pikoli about the impending crisis.

Senior magistrate Bheki Khumalo, who is in charge of the district criminal court, said trials in the three affected courts, already scheduled until the end of the year, will not be able to proceed.

These cases will have to be adjourned in other courts, which will create a higher workload for the operating courts.

Also, magistrate, orderlies and interpreters stationed in the closed courts will have nothing to do. It will also affect Legal Aid Board attorneys, as one is based at each court.

There are 12 district criminal courts, two of which are reception courts that do not hold trials. Three courts specialise in certain types of crimes, juveniles' cases, petty traffic offences and serious traffic offences.

This leaves seven general courts, three of which won't function from October. Senior Public Prosecutor at the court Sagren Naidoo said there is a shortage of staff not only at the district court but in Pietermaritzburg cluster.

"We are waiting for the national office to advertise these posts," he said.

Batohi said: "I am doing everything in my power to prevent the closure of the courts".

She admitted that there is a crisis situation in Pietermaritzburg and that there are various reasons for it. Batohi said she is trying to get prosecutors from other areas to help out even prosecutors from national office.