

We can combat Coronavirus if we work together

Darren Bergman MP – DA Shadow Minister of International Relations and Cooperation

Introduction

On 27 January, the Department of International Relations and Cooperation (Dirco) issued the following: “we are on a drive to inform people about the virus but not telling them to avoid travelling to that country” (DIRCO spokesperson Lunga Ngqengelele)

This response was very diplomatic, but at that stage, we were the only country with this message, probably paying credit to our relationship with China.

Ambassador Lin Songtian

Around that time Ambassador Lin Songtian held a press conference and filled a void left by our President and Minister by trying to put the minds of our country at ease and by assuring us that China has this outbreak under control and that South Africans are being treated well.

DA Abroad

It is at this stage that the DA, through the DA abroad, started getting frantic emails from concerned individuals who want to return to South Africa or wanted advice, but they could not get hold of people at DIRCO or the South African missions.

This is very different from the pictures being painted in the press whereby our Minister went on record stating, for example, that she had not heard of one South African wanting to return.

To cut a long story short, we tested the numbers at the missions, and we tested DIRCO’s emergency number. We wrote a letter to the Minister calling for back up for the staff in China and offering our sympathies and empathy to the staff and all people in China.

Unfortunately, we were politically ignored. However, it became suspiciously clear that there is another power at play.

Free State

The Free State Province is known to have an agreement with China around the training of medical students. A whole host of these students return. It would seem that the Free State had facilitated some agreement directly with China.

DIRCO

Suddenly officials at DIRCO start co-operating with us to assist in compiling a list of people to evacuate.

We thank Ambassador Songtian for his proactiveness and we ask him to relay our message of hope that China can find a cure soon and that a sudden end to this tragedy is near.

To South Africa, thanks for taking the bold decision for bringing our people back and for taking the necessary health and welfare precautions with them, their families and the rest of SA before returning them to us.

To the Minister, the moral of the story is that things can work so much better if we drop the arrogance and aloofness and come together and work together. By now, we should know that things should be controlled by this house and not the Free State.

I thank you.

