Rwanda and South Africa have agreed to restore visa services for Rwandan citizens holding ordinary passports within the next 12 months, marking a major step toward rebuilding relations after years of diplomatic tensions.

The agreement was reached Wednesday during high-level talks in Pretoria between Rwanda's Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Olivier J.P. Nduhungirehe, and South Africa's Minister of International Relations and Cooperation, Ronald Lamola.

The two ministers signed a joint communiqué outlining a roadmap to strengthen political, economic and security cooperation while reviving bilateral mechanisms that had weakened during years of strained relations.

Under the agreement, South Africa will gradually resume issuing visas to holders of ordinary Rwandan passports after technical and diplomatic procedures are completed. Officials said the process is expected to be fully implemented by mid-2027.

The visa decision is one of the most significant outcomes of renewed engagement between Kigali and Pretoria, following years of restrictions that made travel difficult for many Rwandans seeking to visit South Africa for business, education, tourism and other purposes.

Relations between the two countries deteriorated sharply from 2014 amid political and security disagreements that affected cooperation.

Speaking after the meeting, Lamola said the relationship between the two countries remained important despite periods of disagreement.

"Above our differences and our occasional inability to see things the same way, the relationship between our countries has always been one of friendship, cooperation and mutual respect," Lamola said.

He said both countries share lessons from difficult histories, including apartheid in South Africa and the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda.

"Our countries emerged from difficult experiences, and those experiences continue to bind us through a shared commitment to reconciliation, African unity and

development," he said.

Nduhungirehe described the meeting as the beginning of a new chapter in Rwanda-South Africa relations.

"Today's meeting demonstrates the commitment of our heads of state to open a new chapter in Rwanda-South Africa relations," he said. "It reflects our shared belief that dialogue, mutual respect and constructive engagement remain the best way to resolve differences and strengthen cooperation."

As part of the renewed partnership, the two countries agreed to reactivate the Joint Commission for Cooperation (JCC), a framework for collaboration in politics, trade, education, culture, science, technology and social development. Rwanda will host the next JCC meeting during the first quarter of 2027.

The ministers also committed to expanding cooperation in trade, investment, tourism, health, higher education, scientific research and technology. South Africa welcomed Rwanda's decision to lift restrictions on imports of South African animal products imposed in 2017 following a listeriosis outbreak.

The talks also addressed regional security concerns, including conflicts in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, South Sudan, Somalia and the Sahel region.

Both countries reaffirmed support for resolving conflicts through dialogue and mediation and called for stronger African-led peace and security mechanisms, including the African Standby Force.

The meeting came after years of tensions between Kigali and Pretoria. Rwanda has repeatedly accused South Africa of allowing individuals and groups opposed to the Rwandan government to operate from its territory.

More recently, disagreements emerged over the conflict in eastern Congo, where Rwanda has criticized military deployments supporting the Congolese government and accused allied forces of cooperating with the FDLR, an armed group linked to perpetrators of the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi. The allegations have been disputed by other parties involved in the conflict.

Despite those differences, officials from both countries said the Pretoria talks showed a shared commitment to resolving disputes through dialogue and restoring trust.

Presidents Paul Kagame and Cyril Ramaphosa are expected to hold further discussions at a later date through diplomatic channels.

For many Rwandans, the planned restoration of visa services is likely to be the clearest sign yet that relations between the two countries are entering a new phase after years of uncertainty.