

The presidency

Zuma pad raises its battlements

The building of yet another fence suggests rising paranoia about the president's safety

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Seven years after the construction of a controversial R90-million anti-climb, motion-detection security fence around Bryntirion Estate, which includes President Jacob Zuma's official residence in Pretoria, the government is now erecting another enclosure around the estate at a further cost of almost R20-million to taxpayers.

"This is a fence to protect a fence," said a source with knowledge of the project.

Major questions have been raised about the price tag for the 8km enclosure, 70% of which will take the form of a fence and 30% a concrete wall.

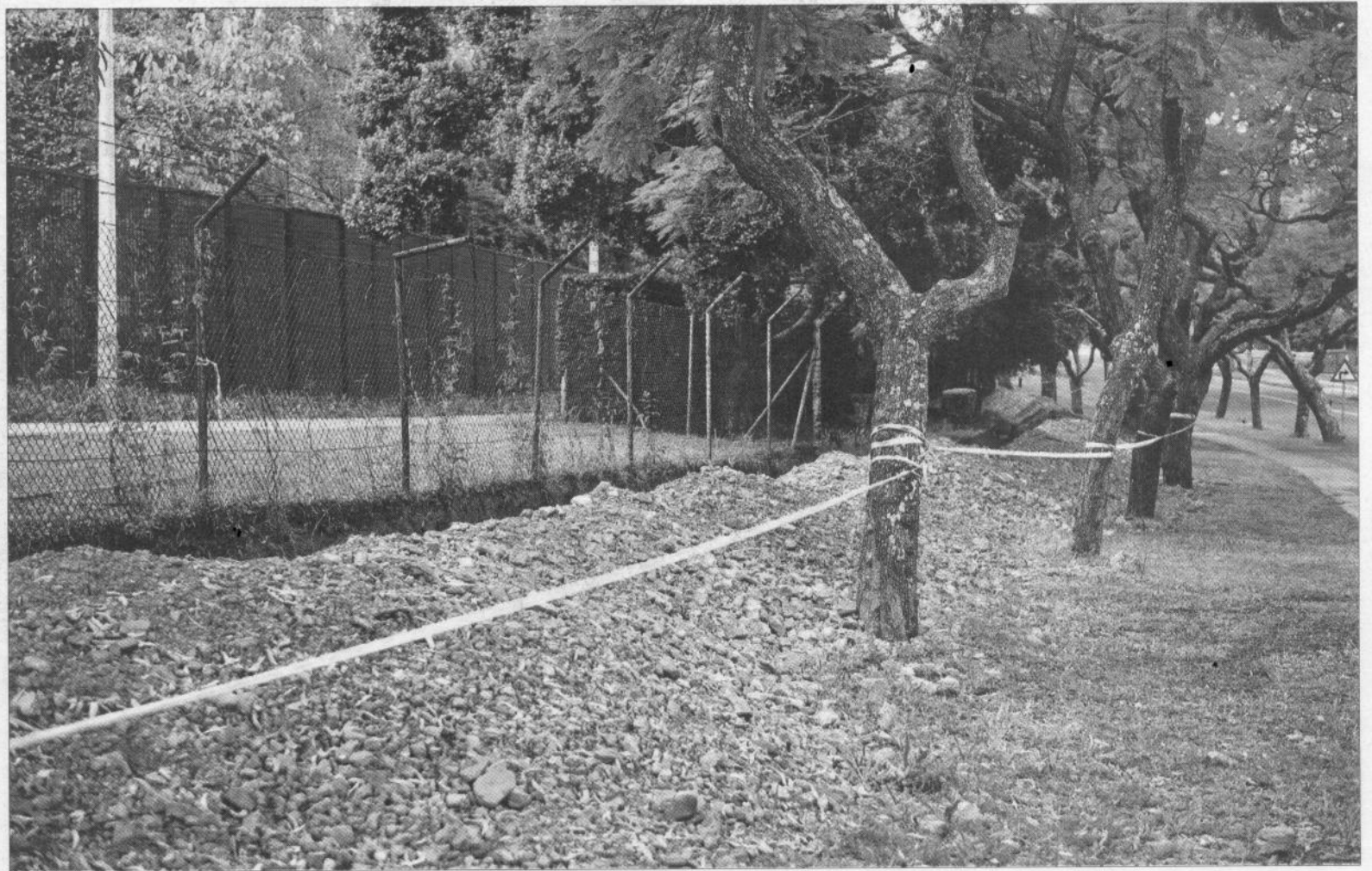
Hermanus van Niekerk, a specialist with 26 years' experience in security systems, interviewed by amaBhungane calculated that, including CCTV cameras and a state-of-the-art alarm system, the enclosure should cost R6.4-million — a third of the contract price.

There are also indications that the project, undertaken by Kgafela Construction, is behind schedule. Construction in what was originally envisaged as an eight-month project started in April 2012. However, on a recent visit to the site, amaBhungane established that only the foundation for the enclosure had been laid.

The public works department did not answer a question about whether the development is running behind schedule, saying only that it is due for completion in October this year.

Asked for comment, Kgafela's owner, Stephens Somo, would only say: "Any information related to the Bryntirion Estate project must be communicated with the client [the department of public works]."

Somo would also not answer questions relating to his credit history. AmaBhungane has established that a string of court judgments have been handed down against him in recent months relating to unpaid bills for building materials and equipment (see "Bryntirion contractor faces wall of unpaid creditors", Page 4).



Sealed off: The R20-million 'fence to protect a fence' around the president's Pretoria home is part of a security upgrade. Photo: Madelene Cronjé

As well as the presidential mansion, Mahlamba Ndlopfu, Bryntirion incorporates the deputy president's residence, OR Tambo House, the presidential guesthouse and the residences of Cabinet ministers.

The development appears to reflect growing government sensitivity about Zuma's safety, and has been matched by security upgrades at his Nkandla homestead.

At least R40-million has also been spent on the presidential residence and offices in Cape Town in recent years, although it is not known how much of this is security related.

Asked why it was thought necessary to build a second perimeter enclosure, public works said it was a continuation of a master plan providing for a five-phase upgrade. This was required because "there are people living on the estate".

Public Works Minister Thulas Nxesi has conceded in Parliament that cost controls in his department's projects are often inadequate.

When the broader upgrade of Bryntirion and Mahlamba Ndlopfu was announced in 2011, it was costed at about R350-million. The Democratic Alliance's then parliamentary leader, Athol Trollip, described it as "wasteful, self-indulgent expenditure in a country where access to basic services is still regarded as a luxury by millions".

Answering a parliamentary question in April 2011, then public works minister Gwen Mahlangu-Nkabinde revealed that the Mahlamba Ndlopfu upgrade would incorporate specialised security features including escape routes, an electronic surveillance system, a new security perimeter fence, upgraded access control measures and an intercom and danger warning systems.

The total cost of the improvements, including "attention to the swimming pool" and construction of a sauna and steam room, was said to be just less than R168-million.

A total of R191-million was also

set aside for work on the larger Bryntirion estate, much of it security related. In addition to the new outer boundary fence, with a metre-high crash barrier along Church Street, it includes another fence costing R42-million, upgraded access gates and a dog unit. The estate already has its own police station.

The current development comes just seven years after the controversial installation of a motion-detection fence around Bryntirion in 2007, under the presidency of Thabo Mbeki. The official price tag of the project was R90-million, but amaBhungane has heard allegations that there was a major cost overrun.

In addition to the price of the job — which amounted to R11000 per metre — controversy swirled around the fact that the Tshwane Metropolitan Council had denied applications by the residents of Arcadia, across the road from Bryntirion, for the erection of security booms at access points to the suburb.

The council also approved the closure of six roads around the estate to improve security and access control, prompting residents to complain that this had caused traffic problems.

Claus Schutte of the Arcadia Residents and Ratepayers Association said residents were also worried about the possible destruction of heritage stone walls around Bryntirion and had demanded drawings of the structure from public works department officials.

Van Niekerk suggested that the price tag for the new Bryntirion perimeter fence was "astronomical — someone is definitely receiving a fat pay cheque". Attempts to reach public works for reaction to Van Niekerk's comments were unsuccessful.



AmaBhungane, the investigators of the M&G Centre for Investigative Journalism, produced this story. All views are ours.
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