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## NEWS

# Foiled land-grabbers turn violent

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**O**N DAY 24 of a stand-off between the residents of four Chatsworth suburbs and a large group of land-grabbers looking to making their homes there, tensions remain high and frustration is setting in.

Residents of Crossmoor, Moorton, Savannah Park and parts of Shallcross are barely able to sleep for fear of finding land invaders settling down metres away from their door steps.

Over the past month, informal residents have been marking off spaces to build homes on vacant land, but their efforts have been thwarted at every turn by the residents and eThekweni Municipality's land invasion unit.

On Friday night, the informal residents turned violent when another attempt to build was met with resistance. A large group allegedly removed three vehicles from a scrapyard, which they burnt along with tyres on Higgsin Highway. They were also accused of stoning passing cars. Fires raged in the area until the early hours of Saturday morning.

The public order policing



Resident Omi Nair posted this picture on facebook, showing how the land invaders are protesting against their removal by burning tyres and stolen scrap cars. The fires raged until the early hours of the morning and blocked the highway.

unit used stun grenades and teargas to ward off the attackers.

"Last night (Friday) was hectic. They came with greater numbers and even though we were ready, we could not control them," said Omi Nair, who heads the Crossmoor Crisis Committee.

"They burnt whatever they could find and blocked off the highway. We are going to sleep a little now and then we will get ready for tonight. We know they will be back."

Police spokesperson Captain Ngobile Gwala said a case of public violence was being investigated.

Another exhausted resident, who requested anonymity, said they needed help.

He said the problem started last month when locals noticed some people clearing bush on land that has been vacant for more than 40 years.

"So we also started clearing up some of the bush to see

what they were up to. We then noticed they were attempting to build two shacks."

By alerting the relevant authorities and calling in the local ward councillors, the shacks were destroyed and the land invaders chased off.

"But they came back, this time with twice as many supporters," said the resident.

"We did everything we could to chase them away, but each time they returned with greater numbers. Now they outnumber us. Things will only get worse unless we get help."

Another concerned resident said: "These shacks will depreciate the value of our properties. More than that, we have water restrictions and right now, we don't have electricity because of the illegal connections."

"How are we supposed to accept this illegal settlement if it's going to negatively affect our lives?"

Since the weekend's havoc, the situation is tense.

"During the day everything is calm," said the man, who was born and raised in the area. But we know it's not over. Every time we have them removed, they come back with more people.

"We will be alerted to a group clearing out bush on a vacant spot, so we send out people and the police. But while they are there, another group attempts to build shacks at a different spot."

A third resident said: "I was in the heart of everything (at the weekend). I was on the highway when they made a bonfire and burnt tyres or whatever else they could find. We had great help from the metro police, but this is an emergency. It's not too long now before there's going to be a bloodbath."

"We are not violent people. We cannot match their numbers. We cannot keep them out forever. I think councillors need to see what's going on and do something about it."

"The fact that this has been going on so long means the councillors, who were here when they needed our votes, are now not doing their jobs."

The DA ward councillor for Crossmoor, Sharon Hoosen, confirmed residents had been without electricity due to illegal connections.

"Also, their security alarm systems do not work and, due to them living in a high crime zone, they are left in a state of panic," she said.

A spokesperson for the KZN Department of Human Settlements and Public Works, Mphahlele Kholoyi, said: "In a situation like this, where the land is owned by the municipality, there is only so much we can do. We have to prevent the land from being invaded because, once shacks are built, it becomes a much more difficult process to evict them."

"We would have to apply for eviction and we would also have to provide alternative accommodation. If we do this, though, it is not fair to the law-abiding citizens on the waiting list for new houses."

According to the municipality, its land invasion unit had visited Crossmoor more than 18 times since March 20.

"To ensure those living within informal settlements have access to basic services, the city has embarked on an informal settlement electrification programme if the land is municipal-owned," a spokesperson said.

Baloyi said the best way forward would be to take preventive measures.

"If we have a fence put up, then we can exercise the laws of trespassing and it becomes a simpler way to keep land invaders out," he said.

Sibusiso Khwela, the Ward 17 councillor, said the invaders were from neighbouring wards.

"I met about 80 of them. I told them that there is a process, mechanisms in place for housing – a database and a waiting list," he said. "I advised them to speak to their local councillors."

Meanwhile, Nair said the community was appealing to businesses, "who have, for over 40 years, benefited from the patronage of the Chatsworth community", to step in and assist wherever possible with protective gear, safety equipment, high-powered torches and lighting, inclement weather attire, grzzz-bz, bottled water, and sustenance for the patrollers and law enforcement officers who are spending long hours on the street.

"We are calling on security companies to give back to the community by joining forces and patrolling our streets. We need to form a partnership and get big business to help us with resources in the 'Adopt a Spot' initiative, so that these open spaces can be utilised optimally for the benefit of the community."

● "Our message is clear – back off" – Page 16