

Empty promises to isolated families

When the wood-and-iron homes of some of the last remaining Indian families living in Seven Tanks in the Silverglen Nature Reserve were looted and burned in November 2015, a dark cloud hung over the community. With no money to rebuild their homes, the affected families were forced to move out and seek shelter elsewhere. Thereafter, during a visit to the area by the KZN Department of Human Settlements and Public Works, the residents claimed they were promised building materials to upgrade their homes. But, two years later, they say nothing has been done to assist them. CHARLENE SOMDUTH reports on their plight.

WHEN you drive through the Silverglen Nature Reserve you are captivated by the sound of nature and the varying species of plants.

The last thing you would expect to see is a community of dozens of families living together. In the heart of the nature reserve, which borders uMlazi, Silverglen and other parts of Chatsworth, lies the historic community of Seven Tanks.

For more than 100 years, families – descendants of Indian indentured labourers – have called this place home.

But attacks from criminals have caused some to flee. And while 23 families have apparently indicated to KZN authorities that they are willing to relocate, 14 are staying put.

They are reluctant to move because of ancestral ties to the area, as well as their love of traditional farming.

Explaining how they came to be there, local DA councillor Tony Govender said that years after indentured labourers came to South Africa, they found work at the then Umlazi waterworks, a treatment plant commonly known as Seven Tanks.

“With no other source of accommodation, the management gave them the surrounding land to build homes.”

Because of financial constraints, he said the families built their homes out of wood and iron.

“The filtered water from the plant flowed through streams in the area and provided healthy ground for cultivation.”

“While the men worked on the plant, the women supplemented their income by growing herbs and vegetables. These items were then sold to surrounding markets.”

Govender said there was no electricity, running water or proper sanitation, but over the years that changed with assistance from the city.

“Although families still live in wood-and-iron homes, they were provided with electricity and piped water, but they lack proper toilet facilities. They use a pit system.”



Resident Sunitha Rampersad shows local councillor Tony Govender the red ring sprayed on to a home two years ago, which was an indication they would receive building materials. PICTURES: NQOBILE MBONAMBI

He said the majority of residents had been living in Seven Tanks since birth and were unable to leave because of financial constraints. “November 2015 was a difficult time for them after six homes were looted and burned. For years, despite their challenges, they lived in harmony and when this happened, it left them heartbroken.

“But in the sadness there was hope for a better life because they were promised material to help rebuild or renovate their homes from wood and iron, to brick.”

Govender said during a visit by the MEC of Human Settlements and Public Works, Ravi Pillay, former mayor James Nxumalo and officials from the KZN Department of Community Safety, homes were marked with red spray paint.

“This was used as an indication that they would receive building material, but two years down the line nothing has been done. The community continues to live in isolation with no help of a better future.”

He continued: “Six months after becoming the councillor, I approached an official from the Department of Human Settlements, who is in charge



of the south region, about the promises made.

“The official told me the department was aware of the promise and was looking into the matter as there was no funds available to purchase the building materials.”

Govender said it was disappointing the community was left with empty promises.

A statement issued by the department to POST read: “The latest information is that professional service providers, with respect to land surveying and town planning, had been appointed and the two respective service providers had commenced with some activities relating to

obtaining approvals for housing provision to the affected Seven Tanks residents.

“As recent as February 9, 2017, a site inspection was conducted by the appointed town planning service provider and councillor for Ward 73 as well as the interviewing of some residents to ascertain how the residents are currently settled and how they want to be assisted.”

It further stated that:

- There are approximately 37 households identified on site.

- The municipality’s Estates Unit has confirmed that seven families have lease

agreements with the metro.

- Out of the 37 families in one section of Seven Tanks, 23 are willing to relocate.

- Some have indicated they are reluctant to move due to ancestral ties with the area.

- Subsistence agriculture is the main source of income for residents to sustain themselves.

- Most residents prefer to retain their current agricultural activities even when they relocate, which might be a challenge when they are relocated to urban areas where land use controls prohibit agricultural activities.



Residents Venie, Rani and Kisten Naicker outside their home. BELOW: Jaydev Rampersad inside his home. PICTURES: NQOBILE MBONAMBI

PENSIONER Kisten Naicker, 72, has lived in Seven Tanks all his life, but has yet to see his life improve.

“My grandfather settled in this community many years ago. He built our home out of wood and iron,” he told POST. “Back then, life was hard and it continues to be difficult. Everything we have today, such as electricity and running water, we had to fight for.”

Naicker said despite the financial struggles, the community had made lives for themselves in the nature reserve.

But the grandfather of five said that 23 years into democracy they were still fighting for their basic human needs, which included access to proper sanitation.

“While we have running water and electricity, which we pay for, we are still forced to use pit toilets.”

Naicker said their homes were in a poor condition.

“When it rains, water leaks through the cracks in the roof. Wood-eating insects are damaging the wood. We were told residents would be getting R45 000 to R50 000 worth of building materials in 2015 after the homes were looted and burned. I thought this was going to be my chance to improve my home.

“Officials came around and marked our homes with red rings and promised to return with the materials, but we have not seen or heard from them again.”

Kisten shares the home with his wife and has not thought about moving.

“At our age, relocating is



not something that we want to do.”

Feeling disappointed, another resident, Jaydev Rampersad, said life had to go on.

“Government made us promises and it is disappointing that we have been ignored. As much as I need the help, I know there is a possibility nothing is going to happen.”

The father of two lives in a wood-and-iron home with his children and relatives.

“Life is not easy. We cannot afford to move out of the area. To make ends meet, I plant herbs. These are sold at the Bangladesh Market in Unit 3.”

Rampersad, 42, said he used the money to buy food and pay his water and electricity bills, which averaged about R2 000 a month. The family does not pay rent to the municipality.

“The most difficult period is when there is no rain and our crops cannot grow.”

Rampersad said his family were not prepared to move.

“We want help from the government to build proper homes. We have tried to get jobs, but it is very hard and farming is our only option.

Another resident, who declined to be named, described the area as a quite pleasant place to live.

“I live alone in a three-bedroom tin house with a small kitchen, and an area bathing and to use the toilet only have cold water and water. I want hot water. I have to boil it on an outside fire.”

Unlike the other residents the self-employed man moved to Seven Tanks a few years because of personal problems.

“I grew up having the basics of a proper home with proper sanitation and running hot and cold water.

“Now I find myself here in Seven Tanks, living in a tin house. It is challenging, especially when it rains – the home gets flooded. It takes days to dry out.”

The man said he hoped government would intervene soon.