

Minister's 'pointless' riot police protection

By NATHI OLIFANT

● Eight police officers and a Nyala armoured vehicle have been guarding Public Works Minister Nathi Nhleko's rarely visited home in rural northern KwaZulu-Natal day and night – until questions were asked this week.

The tight security, provided by the Empangeni public order policing unit, deprived the surrounding community of police resources and was maintained despite there being no credible threat to the minister's safety. Guarding the homes of ministers is also not the mandate of the public order policing unit.

The security detail at the house in Mhlathuzana was initially withdrawn on April 1 after Nhleko was moved from the Police Ministry to public works as part of President Jacob Zuma's cabinet reshuffle two days earlier, but was soon reinstated.

This week, after the Sunday Times sent questions to the police and Nhleko's ministry about the issue, the security was



A police Nyala guards Minister of Public Works Nathi Nhleko's rural home.



Only Nhleko gets a permanent Nyala stationed in his yard. Not even the President has one

Senior police officer

hastily withdrawn.

Nhleko has official residences in Cape Town and Pretoria, which, as per law, are under police guard.

The Mhlathuzana property is occupied by Nhleko's son, a domestic worker and a groundsman. There are also livestock and a horse, which recently died, police sources said.

When the Sunday Times visited the property this month, two police officers were in the yard. Nearby, the Nyala stood behind a perimeter fence.

Nhleko's office refused to comment.

The commander of the riot police unit in Empangeni, Colonel Anthony Slinger, said on Thursday: "All I can confirm is that I got an instruction to remove the members today, which I did. I only follow instructions."

However, before Thursday's decision to recall the security, the Sunday Times established that officers of the Empangeni unit were livid that valuable resources were

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being deployed to Nhleko's house for no valid reason.

It was also established that on at least two occasions officers had called in the Nyala for operational backup, but that it was not available because it was stationed at Nhleko's house.

In one case in May, officers needed help as protesting workers in Richards Bay went on the rampage and used a bulldozer to overturn a police van. On another occasion on March 27, police radioed for the Nyala to assist at a violent service delivery protest in nearby Eshowe.

The Empangeni police cluster – which spans hundreds of square kilometres – has just four Nyalas. But with one of them not operational and another at Nhleko's house, only two were available.

Senior police insiders said Nhleko did not qualify for the security detail and that there was “no credible threat” against the minister.

A source said Slinger had tried to remove his officers and the Nyala on April 1 but was harshly rebuked, allegedly by his direct boss, a Brigadier Damane, and ordered to reverse his decision. Damane could not be reached for comment.

“When former police minister Nathi Mthethwa vacated the portfolio in 2014, members were withdrawn from his home [nearby] in Dondotha. That is why the unit

commander did the same at Minister Nhleko's home,” said another riot police unit insider.

“There's no threat against the minister's life. We have other cabinet ministers from the region, Nathi [Mthethwa], Mildred [Oliphant] and Nkanyezi [Malusi Gigaba], and there are no policemen guarding their homes,” the officer said.

One of Nhleko's cabinet colleagues – who did not want to be identified – said Nhleko's conduct was “blatant abuse” of state resources.

“Security is provided at your workplace, and residences in Cape Town and Pretoria are regarded as your workplace,” this minister said. “Anything that falls outside of that, you have to provide your own security unless there's a special threat and crime intelligence have put together a report detailing that.”

National police spokesman Brigadier Vishnu Naidoo declined to comment on “security issues”.

Johan Burger of the Institute for Security Studies called it a “ridiculous” abuse of resources when public order policing units across the country were under pressure because of a dramatic increase in protests over the past decade.

“The mandate of the [unit] is clearly defined. It is not to guard, or provide close and VIP protection. Ministers' protection is the responsibility of the VIP protection unit ... based on a security assessment,” he said.