

News



Smouldering: Part of Glencoe prison was gutted in a fire in 2015 and, despite money having been earmarked for renovations, little reconstruction has occurred. Now wardens are objecting to returning there, citing safety concerns. Photo: Northern KZN Courier

Unfixed prison reopens

Glencoe wardens fear prisoner escapes after the department demanded that they return to duty, despite the jail's near-derelict state

Sihle Manda

The department of correctional services has reopened a prison gutted in a massive fire two years ago — before restoring it, and despite wardens raising serious safety concerns.

The Glencoe prison in northern KwaZulu-Natal, near Dundee, was closed after the May 2015 fire. Almost 1300 inmates and 150 wardens were sent to neighbouring prisons.

The public works department warned at the time that not only did the damaged parts of the prison have to be rebuilt, but the rest of the ageing structure also had to be renovated to get it “up to standard”.

Late last year, the department of correctional services awarded a R21-million contract for the renovation of “48 houses for



Three months after the fire, the department of public works told Parliament that the “structure was old” and said previous concerns about fires “had not been properly taken care of”. The prison was built in 1977.

“Therefore, the work [was] not only to rebuild what had been destroyed, but had also to ensure that the rest of the struc-

ture, consists of a visitors’ centre and cell blocks. The area, wardens said, was “outside the facility and ... poses an even greater risk of escape and threat to ... [wardens’ lives]”.

In court papers, the wardens say the section of the building that was not burned down had been made into an improvised centre. The reception area, which houses officials who grant access in and out of the facility, is located under four industrial geyers and is soaked in water.

Other concerns raised by Popcru were that there was no hospital, storage facilities, kitchen or telephone lines in the centre.

“There is no hospital at Glencoe as it was located in the section that burned down,” said Popcru. “It is not immediately clear how the healthcare of the offenders will be catered for if this facility is reopened in its current state ... The dishing area has no roof; food will be exposed to dust from the mine sites and bacteria. The dishing area poses the danger of officials being attacked and inmates escaping.”

Glencoe, it argued, “as it stands, poses a serious threat to the lives of officials and a great possibility of inmates escaping”.

Correctional services department spokes-

Glencoe”.

Last month, although minimal construction had taken place, wardens were instructed to report back for duty and some 100 prisoners were to be transferred back to Glencoe. About 50 wardens objected, raising a host of concerns, mainly relating to security. They later approached the Pietermaritzburg high court in a bid to halt the order.

Represented by the Police and Prisons Civil Rights Union (Popcru), wardens argued that the working conditions at the prison were unsafe.

Jeff Dladla, the chairperson of Popcru in KwaZulu-Natal, told the *Mail & Guardian* last week that the visitors’ centre, the kitchen and the administration blocks had been affected by the fire, adding that some cells had been converted to accommodate the damaged structures.

“We were surprised when we were told that the prison was being reopened without being renovated,” Dladla said, adding that the union had then conducted its own inspection.

“It is not our duty to say the jail cannot function, but ours is to make sure that our members are safe in their working environment. That’s why we went to court.”

ture was up to standard,” public works told Parliament in 2015. “The sense was that the client [correctional services] was in approval of the plan, and hopefully, by the end of November, the contractor would be on site.”

A prison insider, who asked not to be identified, said only the fencing had been completed. The matter was heard in the Pietermaritzburg high court recently, where an interim order was granted.

Judge Ramasamy Chetty ruled that the wardens should return to the prison but must not perform any duties on “Courtyard Unit C” until they were presented with certification by the Endumeni municipality or the department of labour, “stating that the working environment is safe and without risk to the health of the employees”.

Courtyard Unit C, which was under con-

person Logan Maistry said the delays in the renovation of the prison were because of a lack in funds, “specifically for emergency infrastructure repairs. To this end, the allocation of funds for the refurbishment ... could only be factored in the current financial year (April 1 2017 to March 31 2018) and the department of public works accordingly appointed a contractor.”

Asked why the department had instructed wardens to return for duty despite the centre not being fixed, Maistry said this was to “manage the challenge of overcrowding ... Parts of Glencoe Correctional Centre that were not affected by the fire will have to be utilised. The 17 cells currently being utilised were never affected by the fire.”

He denied that there was no water and electricity, saying these had been restored. In court papers, the department said there was a medical facility, but Popcru said this was nothing more than “a school sickroom”.

“The areas affected and unaffected by the fire are clearly demarcated. The areas affected by the fire are not in use,” Maistry said.

Responding to safety concerns raised by Popcru, the department said unions had been addressed. The renovations were expected to be completed in the 2018-2019 financial year, “due to budgetary constraints”.

“It is not our duty to say the jail cannot function, but ours is to make sure that Popcru members are safe at work”