

CEO jumps ship as Ingonyama board sinks deeper into trouble

Paddy Harper

The Ingonyama Trust Board (ITB), facing closure in terms of recommendations by Parliament's high-level panel report, has been further rocked by the departure of its chief executive officer, Fikisiwe Madlopha, who quit the nearly R2-million a year job last month.

The ITB, which controls nearly three million hectares of land on behalf of King Goodwill Zwelithini, is battling for its survival.

Madlopha's exit follows a flood of senior staff resignations, many understood to be related to uncertainty about the future of the ITB, which was set up to secure the participation of Zwelithini and Inkatha, as the Inkatha Freedom Party was then known, in the 1994 elections.

The ITB has begun its search for a replacement for Madlopha, a career civil servant who has been central to consolidating its programme of con-

verting residential and commercial permission-to-occupy certificates into leases. Staff members this week confirmed that Madlopha had quit the post. Madlopha, a former head of the KwaZulu-Natal human settlements and public works department, took over as ITB chief executive in 2015, having acted in the post — which had been vacant for more than a year — for some time.

It's not only the ITB's chief executive post that is vacant. It has no head of corporate services and no head of land management services, with adverts for both posts appearing on its website last year.

A staff member, who is not authorised to talk to the media, said they were battling to fill the posts because of the uncertainty about the ITB's future and the controversy surrounding its operations.

"We are struggling to fill posts here. It is a very difficult environment to work in. Things happen not

in the way they are meant to in terms of government regulations. There are a lot of irregular things going on and things are getting worse now."

It is also not clear what effect the departure of Madlopha will have on the ITB's case against five staff members from its real estate department, who have been on suspension since 2016 on a variety of charges.

Madlopha had brought the charges, which include insubordination, against deputy real estate manager Duncan Pakkies and staffers Bhekisihle Zondi, Nono Msani,

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Nompumelelo Ndlovu and Lungile Sibiya. She was to have testified against them at a disciplinary hearing later this month.

The employees claim they were removed as part of a purge of workers who did not "fit in" with the programme to extend leases to residents of tribal land falling under the ITB, including government workers.

They also allege that their removal made way for the illegal occupation of the Mnini Dam Watersports resort on the KwaZulu-Natal South Coast by owner Ron Wilson's tenant. Wilson is suing the ITB for R1.5-million for the loss of the resort, which he had built on land leased from the board and the local traditional authority.

Madlopha confirmed her departure on Wednesday but declined to comment further or discuss her reasons for leaving the ITB.

The former chief executive said she was dealing with a death in her

family, was preparing for a funeral and was not in a position to talk to the media because of this. Last month Parliament's committee on land reform ordered the ITB to stop its programme to encourage people living on land it controls to convert their permission-to-occupy certificates into leases.

ITB chairperson Jerome Ngwenya was instructed to provide Parliament with evidence for what benefit, if any, the lease programme had for people's security of tenure.

Zwelithini and the provincial House of Traditional Leaders have started mobilising amakhosi to defend the ITB and have called on residents on tribal land to contribute to a legal fund.

ITB spokesperson Simphiwe Mxakaza said Ngwenya would respond to questions on Madlopha's departure and a series of court cases against the trust. He had not done so by the time of publishing.