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Health building not a death trap: Nxesi

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Public Works Minister Thulas Nxesi says while there are ventilation issues with the National Health Department's Civitas Building, it is not uninhabitable.

"Civitas is a state of the art building which has been poorly maintained – and Public Works must take responsibility for that. Poor maintenance in part resulted in malfunctioning of the air-conditioning, in particular. As a result, employees - quite legitimately protested their working conditions.

"However, we strongly reject the sensationalist headlines suggesting that the Department of Health 'Civitas' building is a death trap. The building has never been declared uninhabitable by all appropriate and authorised institutions that undertook an assessment of the building," said Minister Nxesi.

The Minister outlined challenges of the Civitas Building at a joint media briefing with his Health counterpart, Aaron Motsoaledi, on Friday.

According to the two Ministers, two arson attempts were made at the Civitas Building in Pretoria on Tuesday and Thursday, respectively.

"There were two arson attempts this week, with the most recent yesterday afternoon with a fire set on the 14th Floor whilst there were still people in the building," said Minister Nxesi.

Fortunately, alarms went off and staff were able to extinguish the blaze – averting a potentially deadly crisis.

The Ministers say investigations reveal that there was tampering with five of their security features which directly deal with fire detection.

The Minister cited examples of tampering that took place such as the disabling of smoke detectors, disabling of security cameras and the breaking of locks and forced entry to the building and control rooms.

"What has come to light over the past two weeks - which has intensified this week- are deliberate acts of sabotage which are targeting these five fire features to make them dysfunctional at Civitas building.

The cases have since been reported to the police.

"We condemn these acts of criminal sabotage – which are life-threatening. We call on law enforcement to investigate these criminal activities. We will also be intensifying the security on our buildings," said Nxesi.

Health Minister Aaron Motsoaledi said he is extremely worried about the building which has resulted in strike action - affecting the productivity of his department.

"I am worried about other South Africans. South African Health Products Regulations Authority (SAHPRA) has to deal with 5000 applications of section 21 certificates. These certificates are issued to people who suffer from rare diseases and there is no treatment. To get that treatment, they need section 21 certificates. SAHPRA has been unable to cope with issuing these statements as a result of this strike action," said Motsoaledi.

Nxesi said plans are underway to find alternative accommodation while his department addresses the malfunctioning ventilation system.

"We are working jointly – as the Departments of Public Works and Health – to implement interim and long-term solutions – in terms of immediate repairs, longer term refurbishment and making available alternative accommodation in the interim," he said.

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