MTHATHA CITY 'CAPTURED'

Business forum says a syndicate of 5 men has 'hijacked' 100 buildings

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The government has been told that 100 buildings in Mthatha, including hotels and warehouses, have been hijacked and are now run by one syndicate.

This gang, run by five men, was extracting "rents", selling land illegally and imposing a reign of terror, said Mthatha Civil Society Forum convener Phumelele Madikiza.

He said Mthatha was turning into a "mini banana republic".

Nothing was sacred, not even police land at Police Camp, said acting public works HoD Mahlubandile Qwase.

Madikiza wrote to Oscar Mabuyane, who is both the finance MEC and the ANC's provincial chairman.

In a follow-up to the letter on Tuesday, the forum met a team of government leaders at Mthatha's Savoy Hotel.

At the meeting, attended by about 30 people including the Dispatch reporter, were safety and liaison MEC Wezizwe Tikana, KSD mayor Dumani Zozo, provincial SAPS commissioner Lieutenant-General Liziwe Ntshinga and her deputy, Major-General Andre Swart, Qwase, Eastern Cape Development Corporation (ECDC) CEO Ndzondelelo Dlulane, and senior managers of various state departments. The forum was represented by business leaders, professionals, royals, the clergy and community elders.

Forum members called on the state to send law enforcement agencies, and asked for a crackdown on the "hijackers".

Peter Madasa, the chairman of Transkei Hotel, said it took 10 years for his hijacked hotel to be returned to him by a high court ruling in March.

Both urban property and farmland were being invaded and illegally sold off to squatters, forum members claimed.

Madikiza said: "One of our main concerns is the hijacking and invasion of state properties.

"It is important that we stand firm and take action against the mayhem in Mthatha so that we

have a safer town."

He said many of the properties taken over belong to the ECDC and public works department, but church land and houses in De Coligny had also been invaded.

Tikana said she was impressed with the forum's initiative and promised to crack down on the lawbreakers.

Dlulane said since December

Matiwane Flats doctors' home;

Some Walter Sisulu University staff houses;

• Land at Police Camp residential unit; and

• Land at Efata School for the Deaf and Blind.

The Dispatch reported in June that a Mthatha doctor's ECDC rented flat was cleaned out of all his furniture and other



SHADY BUSINESS: The Windsor Hotel in Leeds Road is one of the buildings that has allegedly been 'hijacked'. Picture: LULAMILE FENI

2017 about 90 ECDC properties, including hotels, flats and warehouses had been invaded.

Qwase said more than 20 properties including residential properties and farms belonging to the national and provincial public works departments had been hijacked or "sold".

Qwase's list included:

- The old Nkululekweni ministerial residential complex;
- The EC Appropriate Technology Research Unit on Mount Pleasant research farm;

goods worth more than R1m.

He allegedly received little help from police.

However, he hired a private investigator, who found some of the goods being shared out among the illegal occupiers in the building.

The forum said some people involved in the invasions claimed to be traditional leaders in Mthatha West who were evicting legal state tenants and replacing them with tenants who paid rents to the crooks.

Dlulane said a businessman who had just received R250m funding for a meat processing business was unable to proceed with the project because the warehouse was invaded.

"All 32 jobs he created are in jeopardy. This is but one of the sad stories. The ECDC is losing up to 30% in monthly rentals. Most of the properties – 90% – are situated in Fort Gale."

The ECDC won an eviction order in February that was followed by evictions of illegal occupants on March 9. He said ECDC's Butterworth properties had also been affected.

In the meeting police were accused of failing to do their job, and there was unhappiness when Ntshinga said police could not evict without a court order.

Retired Mthatha director of prosecutions Humphrey Lusu said: "Police laxity and inertia is worsening the situation. These people should have been arrested for trespassing in the first place. This is ridiculous. Do you suggest that I apply for a court order to remove a person trespassing in my own house? On my own property? It can't be!"

Ntshinga committed to enforcing all court orders and effecting arrests accordingly.

Tikana, Zozo, Ntshinga and Qwase all welcomed the initiative by the forum to flush the illegal occupants out.

The meeting resolved to set up a task team including forum members and representatives from ECDC, public works, finance, rural development & land reform, safety & liaison and Walter Sisulu University to develop a response plan.

Evicting legal state tenants and replacing them with tenants who paid rents to the