

## **Dispatch live, 17 October 2018**

Parliament has heard that some ministerial houses have remained empty for as long as eight years while millions of rand have been spent on their upkeep. This was revealed by top officials from the controversial department of public works in yet another appearance before the standing committee on public accounts (Scopa) on Wednesday, which for several months now has been scrutinising public expenditure on houses for ministers, deputy ministers and MPs.

Of particular interest to MPs is the amount the department is spending just on the maintenance of the ministerial homes (R65-million) compared to how much the ministers and other government officials are paying in rent for those properties. Themba Godi, the chairperson of Scopa, was not impressed when it emerged that at least three ministerial houses had remained vacant for years while the department was spending money to secure accommodation for ministers following the expansion in the size of the cabinet in 2009.

These included houses that had been vacant for six, seven and eight years respectively. "Why this length of time when we have people having to stay in hotels, rent flats?" asked a gobsmacked Godi. Mzwandile Sazona, the chief director of the prestige portfolio within the department, said the houses had remained vacant due to legal disputes with some of their service providers.

"One which is eight years, this house chair there's legal dispute of extension of time that the contractor has with the department, it has been court for many years and unfortunately we can't continue with the project.

"The contractor was on site, because there was an accident of theft in the estate. All contractors were required to leave the estate until the police have investigated. The project manager never interpreted that to affect the extension and the extent of the claims from the

contractor were not justifiable and the department then had a dispute with the contractor," he said.

Turning to the six-year vacant house, Sazona said it had been left vacant by one of the ministers following a burglary. Sazona said it had since been allocated to the head of the Pan African Parliament following security upgrades but he was yet to take occupation of it.

"It was close to an area where there can be an intrusion and there was a burglary at that house which then required the minister to move out of the house. We then put the house on a programme where we had to build security measures. It was vacant while we build the security measures and after that it was allocated to the head of PAP," he said.

The Sunday Times reported in May this year that Pan-African Parliament president Roger Nkodo Dang had rejected a ministerial home offered to him by government, opting instead to stay at the upmarket Michelangelo Hotel in Sandton. IFP MP Mkhuleko Hlengwa said it was simply unjustifiable for directors-general to pay as little as R74 per month in rent for Cape Town flats that cost more than R100-million to upgrade.

Ministers and deputy ministers pay between R900 and R1,200 for their upmarket homes paid for by the taxpayers in Cape Town suburbs such as Rondebosch, Bishopscourt and Pretoria's Waterkloof, among others.

"This kind of lavish expenditure, to a large extent if not fully, can't be justified in a manner in which it is currently presented. The unreasonable cost of R75, R900...These are the kinds of things which agitate society because these are self-made inequalities," said Hlengwa.

Public Works minister Thulas Nxesi said the office benefits of cabinet members and other government officials were being reviewed within the context of a dwindling public purse and President Cyril Ramaphosa's ongoing reconfiguration of the size of government departments.