



### People at risk

"The fact of the matter is that stuff like pipes and pumps weren't maintained as originally planned — that is why things started falling apart. Every winter you were putting the people there at more and more risk." — Gideon van Zyl, former South African National Antarctic Programme chief engineer, who requested the refurbishment project



# Contract threat to SA Antarctic team

A dozen scientists are now at SA's Antarctic base, Sanae IV, as the harsh conditions of midwinter loom — but a key maintenance contractor says the government has not paid it for six months, jeopardising the safety of the scientists. Picture: Supplied

## Public works accused of putting lives of SA scientists at risk

By **BOBBY JORDAN**

● A payment dispute over critical equipment upgrades at SA's Antarctic base has prompted warnings about the safety of scientists living there.

The public works department owes nearly R36m to the contractor employed to refurbish the remote base, which sits on a ridge about 150km from the ocean, according to documents seen by the Sunday Times.

As a result, the contractor has begun legal action before handing over manuals needed to ensure the upkeep of state-of-the-art equipment, which includes generators, air-conditioning, an effluent plant, a fire-fighting system and a snow smelter.

The latest over-wintering team, consisting of 12 members, is heading into midwinter, when temperatures drop to around -50°C and polar winds can reach 200km/h. Their 175m-long base, dubbed the South African National Antarctic Expedition (Sanae IV), is considered one of the most sophisticated on the ice continent. It is central to the scientific commitments of SA as a founder signatory of the Antarctic Treaty, which established the continent as an international scientific preserve.

However, Cape Town refurbishment contractor Nolitha this week questioned the government's commitment to the scientists, saying its invoices had not been paid since November, despite the company obtaining a job completion certificate.

The refurbishment project began in 2015 and has so far cost more than R200m.

Stakeholders with inside knowledge said a falling-out between public works, which is in charge of maintaining government infrastructure, and its main Antarctic contractor did not augur well for the management of

the base.

Correspondence between the company and government stakeholders suggests disagreement over the terms of payment. Internal e-mails suggest public works did not obtain the necessary budget from the Treasury to fund the last stage of refurbishment, which was unexpectedly costly.

Last month, Nolitha detailed its frustrations in a letter to public works minister Thulas Nxesi.

"The risk of severe reputational damage to our government caused by this lapse of administration ... is significant," said company lawyer Abraham Dawson.

Dawson said this week he had also reported the matter to the department of monitoring and evaluation in the presidency. In addition to its legal obligations, he said, public works had a moral responsibility to resolve the payment dispute in the interests of avoiding unnecessary job losses.

Dawson said the dispute had turned an empowerment success story — Nolitha is 100% black-owned — into another instance

# R220m

THE COST

of the Sanae IV refurbishment project

# R36m

THE AMOUNT

the main contractor says it is owed

# -50 C

Midwinter temperature in Antarctica

of bureaucratic failure.

"Those 12 people [at the base], their lives are at stake. They are in the middle of the ice, they are scientists. If something goes wrong it becomes an international crisis," Dawson said.

"If Nolitha is not being paid and it folds, how are you going to get another company with the same capacity, same experience and same [skilled] personnel to go over there? Four years in a row they have gone over and taken over a team, and stayed there three months. How are you going to line up another service provider with that experience?"

In 2016, the department of public works was singled out by Jeff Radebe, who was then minister in the presidency, for failing to pay suppliers.

Engineering sources questioned whether the department's own engineers would be adequately trained to handle the new equipment in the absence of a contracted maintenance partner.

Nolitha CEO Stephen Pillay said financial

pressure due to the payment default meant the company had to take legal action. "We feel that we have run out of options and avenues to address our problem."

Public works spokesperson Lunga Mahlangu said the department would comment once it had discussed the matter at a senior-level meeting next week.

Hendrik Stassen, the architect of Sanae IV, said he was not aware of the dispute but emphasised the critical need for equipment maintenance. "Regular and preventative maintenance is crucial for any remote station, where any breakdown that impacts on normal functioning may have serious consequences for its inhabitants, never mind the impact on any international reputation," he said.

Public works has faced criticism before over the South African National Antarctic Programme, which includes bases on Marion and Gough islands. On Marion, three generators failed between December 2017 and March 2018, forcing the team to rely on an emergency generator for four weeks.