

RITCHIE IN CHAOS

Municipal and other buildings set alight

STAFF REPORTER

CHAOS erupted in Ritchie yesterday with municipal and other buildings set alight and the local fire department unable to access the area after they were reportedly pelted with stones by a group of about 50 protesters.

While protest action started early yesterday morning with the blocking of the main road in the area, it had spiralled out of control by yesterday afternoon.

According to reports received, both the municipal offices as well as an internet cafe in the town had been set alight.

However, the local fire department was unable to access the area after they were pelted with stones.

DA councillor Elize Niemann, who lives in Ritchie, said yesterday that the protest action followed a community meeting that was held on Wednesday evening.

"A large group of about 200 people attended the meeting where they were informed that Northern Cape Premier Zumani Saul would not be available to address them."

Niemann explained that the community members had applied for permission for a legal protest so that a memorandum could be handed over to the premier. However, this was denied as he was not available to accept the memorandum.

Niemann said a decision was then taken at Wednesday's meeting to continue the protest action until Saul addressed the community.

"There were sporadic incidents of toyi-toying throughout Wednesday night and early yesterday morning the main road coming into Ritchie was blocked with burning tyres. However, the police fired two stun grenades and removed the tyres and the rubble. By 6.30am the road was again open to traffic."

Niemann said that there were a number of threats made during the course of the morning that the municipal building would be set alight.

"At one stage, burning tyres were placed in front of the building and the door was burnt but the building was not set alight."

By yesterday afternoon, however, the situation had deteriorated and a portion of the municipal building, where people pay their accounts, was set alight, as well as an internet cafe.

According to reports, the local fire department could not access the two fires and were forced to remain at the station as the situation was too dangerous. Threats were also made that the fire department would be set alight and the N12 blocked.

"There are numerous rumours doing the rounds and no one knows for sure what is true," Niemann added.

A DFA reporter, who attempted to speak to the protesters in the morning, was hit on the head with a rock as well as injured on the arm.

There was a heavy police presence in the area throughout the day and a number of stun grenades were fired as well as rubber bullets and according to residents there were

reports that several people, including a child, had been shot with rubber bullets.

Many residents stayed indoors, too afraid to venture outside, while others returning from work in Kimberley walked through the veld in an attempt to avoid the hot spots.

Police spokesperson Captain Olebogeng Tawana confirmed yesterday afternoon that the Public Order police were continuing to monitor the situation in Ritchie, in the wake of protests in the area.

"At this stage no injuries have been reported," he said.

The protests, which followed the appointment process of a R49 million road project in Ritchie, as well as unhappiness over service delivery, originally broke out two weeks ago and left a trail of destruction including the looting of foreign tuck shops.

At the time residents complained that sub-contractors appointed to work on a 29km road had not been appointed on merit and accused the area's two councillors of appointing only their friends and family members to work on the project.

Residents also pointed fingers at Sol Plaatje Municipality, claiming that the local authority had failed to deliver adequate services to the community.

Municipal spokesperson Sello Matsie explained yesterday that dissatisfaction had arisen over two projects, the one being the grading of gravel roads in the area, and the other being a Department of Public Works project, involving the R49 million road leading into Ritchie.

Allegations have been made that the wife of a Sol Plaatje employee obtained a contract as a sub-contractor on the Public Works project.

"If this is true, it is a criminal offence for the spouse or family member of any municipal employee, or government-appointed employee to obtain a government contract, whether it is a provincial government contract or a national government contract. There have also been calls in Parliament for these people to be arrested, while they are also flagged by the auditor-general."

Matsie added that these allegations would be investigated and the necessary action will be taken against the employee.

Matsie also condemned the burning and threats of further damages at the municipal service centres in Ritchie.

"Threats have also been made against our employees and members of the media were today also pelted with stones. There is no need for any criminal activities and we call on the police to protect lives and property."

He added that legitimate concerns of the community about unemployment and poverty should not be hijacked for selfish reasons.

"We will assist and co-operate with other stakeholders to bring stability to Ritchie, but burning or destroying infrastructure is a big no and cannot be condoned. We will also be engaging the community regarding their concerns on an urgent basis."