

■ COURTS

Police flats legal battle drags on

Stubborn tenants refuse to leave, delaying urgently needed upgrades

ZAINUL DAWOOD

THE SA Police Services is locked in a court battle with tenants who are occupying two police residential buildings in Durban.

Residents of the Natalia and Somtseu courts, situated within the Durban Central police station premises on Stalwart Simelane (Stanger) Street, were served eviction notices because the flats were in need of major structural upgrades.

While details of the court action have not been made available to the media, it has taken police management nearly 10 years to try to remove the tenants.

Only a few of the 120 flats in the 16-floor Natalia Court seemed to be occupied yesterday.

Curtains covered windows and the doors were intact. In the vacant flats the doors appeared to have been removed and windows are broken. A generator was stationed outside the building and a pipe led to one of the flats.

One flat still had furniture inside, which was upturned, and the flat appeared ransacked. Hoses from fire extinguishers were missing.

On entering the building, the main water hydrant was overflowing, possibly because of an illegal water connection. The building appeared deserted.

The buildings have been under the media spotlight for more than a decade.

Eviction notices were served in May 2012.

National police spokesperson Brigadier Vishnu Naidoo said maintenance efforts had been delayed when the residents took the SAPS management to court, challenging the eviction process.

"The residential block is in urgent need of complete maintenance. However, in order to perform that maintenance the Department of Public Works needs the whole building to be empty."



INSIDE one of the flats at Natalia Court. | ZAINUL DAWOOD

Naidoo said the missing windows and door frames were removed and stored by police management to ensure that the empty units were not occupied illegally.

"We are hoping for this process to be finalised soon so that the required maintenance can begin," he said.

According to a health and safety report conducted by eThekweni Municipality officials and the fire department, the buildings were in dire need of repairs. This was referred to in the eviction notice served to the tenants, which stated that since 2009, the SAPS had made several attempts to get residents to vacate the buildings for major structural upgrades.

"The condition of the official quarters poses a serious danger to anyone residing in or using the buildings. Unless immediate steps are taken to save the buildings, they may collapse and cause harm to life, limb and property," it said.

Natalia Court and the five-storey Somtseu Court have deep cracks in the structures and the water tanks were con-

taminated and outdated.

In June 2012, the SAPS began legal proceedings to evict residents. In November 2018, police said only 35 tenants were police officers and the others had filtered into the building through "gaps" in the system.

Provincial police spokesperson Lieutenant-Colonel Thulani Zwane had previously said the evicted tenants were retired officers, or those who had resigned or been dismissed, while others had overstayed their occupation period of two years as was allowed by the police housing policy.

Both the Police and Prisons Civil Rights Union and SA Police Union had asked the police management to provide the tenants with alternative accommodation, stagnating the eviction.

Zwane had said the state was under no obligation to provide them with housing and the onus of provision of housing remained the responsibility of each police officer.