

Building 'hijackers' hold Mthatha ransom

Government officials alleged to be involved

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Government officials are allegedly in cahoots with a syndicate that has hijacked 120 state properties in Mthatha.

The properties include buildings, hotels and warehouses, as well as hundreds of hectares of land.

A meeting in Mthatha on Tuesday between top brass of the Eastern Cape Development Corporation (ECDC) and King Sabata Dalindyebo Civil Society Forum (KSD-CSF) heard the syndicate had allegedly infiltrated the ECDC and justice system.

The meeting was to look at how to reclaim the properties, which belong to the provincial

and national public works departments and the ECDC, and speed up legal challenges to the invasions.

The "hijackers" are allegedly led by the Public Assets Community-based Tenants & Owners Association (Pactoa), which is said to be extracting "rents" and selling land illegally amid a state of fear.

The meeting heard this amounted to Mthatha being turned into a "mini banana republic".

But the association says it is merely "looking after state property" and standing up to what it called corruption in the ECDC.

A team comprising officials from crime intelligence, the Directorate for Priority Crime Investigation, the National Prosecuting Authority and King Sabata Dalindyebo municipality was established in 2018 to

reclaim the buildings and land, but there has been little progress.

The situation has cost the ECDC almost R1bn a year in lost rentals since 2017.

ECDC legal compliance and governance executive manager Mandla Mpikashé said documents relating to a high court challenge to the "hijackers" had twice disappeared from the Mthatha high court.

"Two weeks before the matter was to be heard, court documents went missing.

"We then made copies from our file for the judge but on September 11, a day before the hearing, the same copies went missing in court.

"This proves these people have connections everywhere, including in courts," Mpikashé said.

Others speakers alleged there were people within the ECDC

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in cahoots with the syndicate, and that even the KSD-CSF and the National African Federated Chamber of Commerce and Industry (Nafcoc) had been "infiltrated".

ECDC board chair Mandisa Madiba said they would investigate the claims.

"It would be reckless of us as the board not to take action when there are allegations of corruption and collusion by our own employees working with outside structures to loot government properties," Madiba said.

"We are disappointed at the way the judiciary is dealing with us.

"It looks like instead of encouraging law and order, it is propagating lawlessness," Madiba said.

"We are losing more than R800,000 a month on rentals.

"It is even more when adding

municipal costs," he said.

KSD-CSF convener Mpumelelo Madikiza called on government and the judiciary to act fast to tackle what he described as "anarchy which is aimed at turning Mthatha into a little banana republic".

But secretary Yanga Socikwa said Pactoa was a legal structure that "aimed to safeguard abandoned government properties from vandals and prevent them from being a haven for criminals".

He said their efforts to engage the ECDC and government leaders to raise concerns about corruption in the ECDC and poor maintenance of government properties had failed.

"We dispute the allegations," Socikwa said.

"We have not terrorised anyone and demanded no rents — the only money we requested were legal fees."