

Cabinet ministers are failing to pay R1,200-a-month subsidised rentals

● Although they are earning more than R2m a year, 43 current and former ministers owe the government altogether R1.3m in arrears



TIME TO PAY UP: Public works minister Patricia de Lille says letters of demand have been sent to ministers and deputy ministers who have not paid their subsidised rentals, but she would not name them. /Esa Alexander

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Cabinet ministers and their deputies, who earn up to R2.4m a year and are responsible for driving the government's user-pay principle, are failing to pay relatively cheap rentals for their lavish ministerial homes.

The ministers owe the state altogether R1.3m in outstanding rental payments for state-subsidised houses, says public works minister Patricia de Lille.

Presenting the medium-term budget policy statement in October, finance minister Tito Mboweni emphasised the need for South Africans to pay for services. The ANC NEC also resolved to embark on a mass campaign to encourage communities to pay for services.

But the efforts of the government and the ANC efforts may come to nothing as the ministers, most of whom are ANC NEC members, are nonpayers.

Rent for ministerial houses is heavily subsidised and cost about R1,200 a month.

Cabinet ministers get annual salaries of about R2.4m, while deputy ministers get nearly R2m a year.

But the well-paid current and former ministers and their deputies are not paying up.

De Lille revealed in parliament that 43 current and former members of cabinet and their deputies had not paid their rents

and owed the state R1.3m. "The department of public works & infrastructure has informed me there are 43 ministers, who are past and returning members of [government], who are currently in arrears with their payments," De Lille said in a response to a question from the DA.

She said that letters of demand for payment had been sent to the ministers.

"Some have instituted stop-order payment, and we are following up on others. If arrangements are not made and payments have not been received, the account will be handed over to the state attorney for debt collection," De Lille said.

She did not name the ministers and deputy ministers in arrears.

Earlier in 2019, her predecessor, Thulas Nxesi, said the challenge with collecting rental income for ministerial residences was "systemic".

He said that the major issue was that departments failed to set up stop orders on ministers' and deputy ministers' salaries.

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The ministers were largely not to blame. "The building up of arrears is largely not through faults of or negligence by the ministers. It would, therefore, be unfair to name which ministers are in arrears," he said.

Nxesi said that despite many reminders, some departments failed to action the stop orders, leading to escalating debt.

"In the past I have engaged with members of the executive on the debt owed to the department of public works and this was done with relative success.

"However, the challenge persists. Ministers are always willing to co-operate in terms of paying their monthly rentals. The challenge that we must resolve is a systemic one to ensure that the monthly rentals are collected without fail on an ongoing basis," Nxesi said then.

The department of public works is also owed R77m in rentals by various entities.

De Lille said in a recent written reply that culprits included SA's biggest fixed-line operator, Telkom, which owes more than R8m in outstanding rental payments.

Another major company, canned-fish brand Lucky Star, owed more than R400,000 in rental payments. The department had spent thousands of rand in legal costs in the 2017/2018 financial year to collect debt.

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