

MEC clashes with 'illegal flat occupiers who cost state R300m a year'

LULAMILE FENI

Tenants of 262 government-owned flats in Mthatha have accused the judiciary of being "captured" by public works MEC Babalo Madikizela and don't want it to preside over the eviction cases they face at the Mthatha high court.

For its part, the MEC has accused the tenants of stonewalling to avoid paying rent and of draining the state's coffers of R300m a year.

The Old Northcrest Flats Association (Onfa), representing the tenants, accuses Madikizela of conniving with and capturing the judiciary to kick them out of the state properties.

The tenants, who have lived in government-owned flats for decades and have declined to sign new leases and pay rent, are being evicted on the instruction of the department of public works as it seeks to reclaim its assets.

Madikizela's department has appointed a firm of attorneys to handle the evictions programme, known as "Operation Bring Back".

The campaign was initiated by the national department of public works & infrastructure.

About 200 people marched to the public works department in Mthatha and the Mthatha high court on Friday.

In their two memorandums, they demand that Eastern Cape judge-president Selby Mbenenge recuse himself from all cases regarding the evictions.

They also called for Madikizela to withdraw all eviction



CLASH: Tenants of government flats in Northcrest marching to the Mthatha High Court and public works department. Picture: LULAMILE FENI

court applications, and cut ties with the lawyers he hired to draw up leases and evict tenants.

Onfa secretary Phiwokuhle Nqunqa, handing over the memorandums to public works and justice officials, said Madikizela and Mbenenge had discussed the cases even before there were any applications.

"We now have no confidence in the judges here. For fairness, we call on judges from other province to sit for our cases. We have about 1,500 people [who stand] to be unfairly evicted and made homeless," Nqunqa said.

Onfa believes the use of private attorneys, instead of the state attorney's office, is another form of corruption and should be stopped immediately.

Madikizela, since October 2020, has been asking occupants sign new leases to replace those they signed in the era of the Transkei government.

Most tenants have not paid rent since 2015.

A little more than five years ago, the tenants paid R270 a month for a three-bedroom flat and R190 for a two-bedroom one.

Nqunqa says public works now wants R880 for a three-bedroom flat and R720 for a two-bedroom one.

"How can we maintain the properties if rent is not paid, or spend R900,000 per month on services but collect less than R50,000," Madikizela said.

"The province is spending about R530m a year on rates, taxes and services, but collects less than R200m. You are flushing away more than R300m."

Premier Oscar Mabuyane strongly supported Madikizela.

"No people will be allowed to stay and use government property without paying rent.

"We cannot allow lawlessness," he said.