

BORDER ROW

# SIU probe into barrier wall contract welcomed

**SIBUSISO MBOTO and SABELO NSELE**

A SPECIAL Investigating Unit (SIU) probe into the awarding of a multi-million rand tender for the construction of a concrete barrier in uMkhanyakude District has been widely welcomed by opposition parties in the KZN legislature.

The tender was awarded in 2018 for the construction of a concrete barrier wall between the uMkhanyakude Municipality and Mozambique and there are allegations that although more than half of the R85 million has been paid to the contractor, less than a kilometre of the barrier had been constructed by the end of 2020.

The SIU has been given the go-ahead to investigate the matter through the proclamation signed by President Cyril Ramaphosa.

The SIU said it had received allegations from an unnamed whistle-blower claiming the transport department has executed the project of constructing a concrete barrier despite the legal mandate of such project resting with the Department of Public Works and Infrastructure. It said the public works department is the custodian of border infrastructure outlay and maintenance.

The investigation will include:

- ◆Whether there had been any improper conduct by officials or department employees relating to the contract.

- ◆Whether the payments made to the contractor were equitable or cost-effective.

- ◆Whether there had been unauthorised, irregular and wasteful expenditure incurred by the department.

The proclamation authorises the corruption busting unit to use all its legislative powers to subpoena bank

statements and cellphone records, search and seize evidence, and interrogate witnesses under oath.

The IFP's Blessed Gwala said they were encouraged by the move to investigate the tender.

"The SIU is moving in the right direction, mainly because government departments in this province have descended into corruption of unrivalled proportions," said the Member of the Provincial Legislature.

He added that they hoped the investigation would be one of many in the department as there were suspicions that many other contracts had been awarded without due process.

He noted that the Covid-19 lockdown had also been used as a shield to cover corruption.

"People are not doing any work citing the lockdown, but they have no problem in asking to be paid for work that has not been completed," Gwala said.

DA MPL Sharon Goosen agreed that the probe was a welcome intervention from the SIU.

She said during an oversight visit to the project they were not impressed by the pace of the construction.

"I am glad they (SIU) are investigating because on our visit there was a sense that the construction was far too expensive. From the word go this tender raised alarm bells and now we can get to know what really happened," she said.

Department spokesperson Kwanele Ncalane said they welcomed the proclamation by the president.

"We will fully co-operate with all the investigating agencies," he said.

The border on which the barrier is being constructed has long been fingered as a passage for smuggling stolen vehicles, guns and other goods.