

RDP HOUSES

# Amateur firms off the hook for shoddy work

BONGANI HANS AND SABELO NSELE

INEXPERIENCED companies will never be held accountable for the shoddy workmanship in the construction of thousands of low-cost houses worth billions of rand in KwaZulu-Natal in the 1990s as the government had at the time lacked proper planning.

This was revealed by Premier Sihle Zikalala and human settlements MEC Peggy Nkonyeni during their visit this weekend to Pietermaritzburg to inspect 519 houses in KwaPata that have been rebuild from scratch at a cost of R82 million.

The cost of refurbishing faulty houses might be running into hundreds of thousands of rand as Nkonyeni told Independent Media's investigations unit that such houses were all over the province, but she could not say how many of them or how much money the government was spending on rebuilding them.

Millions of residents in the province have been subjected to substandard low-cost houses with others suffering electric shock during rainy seasons when they touch the walls of their wire net-built houses.

Zikalala said the houses that have faults were built at the beginning of the democratic era when there was a lack of planning and no proper specifications. He said the government started in 2010 to rectify or demolish and rebuild the faulty houses.

"Those (companies) that committed the mistakes did that when the first houses were built in 1996."

Some intended beneficiaries of the demolished houses said this was costing them financially as they are renting while waiting for their houses to be completed. Some have waited for more than 10 years for the refurbishment of their houses.

Many residents are forced to relieve themselves in bushes because toilets that were built inside their houses are not functioning and others have

resorted to building long-drop toilets in their small yards.

Smangele Cele, 56, is one of the unfortunate "beneficiaries". For more than 20 years she has been waiting for either the municipality or the provincial Department of Public Works to rectify the fault in her house.

"It never crossed my mind to invite family and friends to visit me because I feel ashamed to be occupying this house. My children opted to live with my relative because they don't feel comfortable in this house because of the bad smell," she said.

Another beneficiary Jonas Mbhewe, 44, has for more than 15 years been using the long drop toilet after his inside toilet was filled up.

"Before we build the long-drop toilet we used the bush to relieve ourselves and risked being attacked by snakes. Before the long drop toilet, at night we would relieve ourselves in the buckets and empty them in the morning."

Nkonyeni said: "We are actually implementing about 14 policy instruments pertaining to human settlements throughout KZN."

When Luleka Ngentsu did research on poorly built RDP houses for her University of Witwatersrand's Master of Science MSc (Building) Construction Project Management in 2017, she found that the Department of Human Settlements had between 2011 and 2015 spent more than R2 billion rectifying low-cost houses, especially in the Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng provinces.

She said this poor workmanship was because of appointing inexperienced emerging contractors who used unskilled labour for the initial construction work.

In 2011 it was reported that the Special Investigating Unit (SIU) investigated 20 companies who had scored questionable contracts to build houses to the tune of R2 billion. | Investigations Department