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The sight of the decaying Robben Island Museum surely has battle-scarred freedom fighters Nelson Mandela, Robert Sobukwe and Walter Sisulu turning in their graves.

According to a former prisoner, the iconic parts of the museum - including the infamous No 5 cell, where Mandela (prisoner number 46664) served 18 of his 27 years in prison - are in a “saddening” state.

“Madiba’s cell looks like a street kid’s hiding place. The blankets have been removed. That’s when you see that something is wrong here because we aren’t taking care of something that belongs to our hearts. I get very emotional,” he said.

“When we were prisoners, the fence was silver. Now it’s rusted. The ground at E Section, where there was a big tree, used to be beautiful. That’s where I was first detained when I got to Robben Island. Now the trees aren’t trimmed,” he said.

The Ex-Political Prisoners Association (EPPA) and the former political prisoner have accused the current managers of the museum of watching it fall apart and of destroying the legacy of the country’s freedom fighters.

“The prison itself isn’t what it used to be. It’s dying a slow death and, as a former prisoner there, I ask myself what’s happening. It’s very wrong. The deterioration started long before Covid-19 [struck the country], to be honest. This has been going on for a very long time.

“They [the management team] are more interested in how much they can make from tourists than in maintaining the prison itself.”

Other significant parts of the prison that have been affected include the limestone quarry where Mandela, Sisulu, Ahmed Kathrada, Govan Mbeki, Harry Gwala and other political prisoners were forced to crush rocks. While they laboured, they secretly caucused.

EPPA national secretary-general Mpho Masemola said the limestone quarry was currently waterlogged and unsightly.

“I visited the stone quarry, which is decaying and full of water. The political prisoners were forced to work there producing the rocks that built the Robben Island prison.

“To us, it’s very much a part of our history and heritage because we prisoners built the jail with our own hands and we were imprisoned in it for fighting for the liberation of this country.”

Masemola alleged that the iconic Susan Kruger ferry - which transported prisoners and staff to the island during apartheid and was later used to convey tourists there - had also been neglected. In 2017, there were already calls to stop using the vessel, which was no longer considered seaworthy.

“[Below the deck of] that boat, you’ll find a prison cell. They used to lock prisoners inside it so that they couldn’t see what was outside. Today, when you get to gate 1 of the museum, you’ll see that grass is growing on top of the boat. It’s full of mice, it’s rotting and it’s about to sink. Nobody’s taking care of it. It’s as if history is being deleted,” added Masemola.

Ex-prisoners have raised various concerns about the state of the museum and have written four letters to President Cyril Ramaphosa, appealing for him to intervene by placing the museum under new administration.

Masemola alleged that the current management were offering jobs to their friends and that money was disappearing into their own pockets, rather than being

# Robben Island Museum FORSAKEN

## The museum’s management team has been accused of corruption, mismanagement and neglect



**LOST  
HERITAGE**  
Various  
parts of the  
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are in a  
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disrepair



intervention. Mthethwa’s office ordered a forensic investigation into the state of affairs at the museum, but the ex-prisoners say they never received the final report.

“If the report of the investigation could be made public, you’d understand what I’m talking about. The museum’s management just eat money and have done nothing except bring misery to the whole situation.

“[The department] tells us they can’t release the report because it’s still ongoing and that disciplinary measures will be taken, but it’s taken too long now. How could the museum managers not be suspended, when the report implicated them? But they’re still there,” said Masemola.

The DA has joined the calls for the investigative report to be released. The party’s Reagen Allen, the chairperson of the standing committee on community safety, cultural affairs and sport, said: “We call on Minister Nathi Mthethwa to urgently do the right thing and make public the Robben Island Museum report and the actions taken to address concerns there. It’s important that the public

know what’s happening at the museum. It contains a mountain of history and this continued secrecy threatens its reputation.”

Minister Nathi Mthethwa’s spokesperson Masechaba Khumalo, said the museum was not unkept and that maintenance of the museum was sourced through the Department of Public Works and Infrastructure.

She said the minister has released the RIM report to the museum’s council.

“Council is in possession of the report. It is council which will respond to requests for the release of the report as it was commissioned by council,” she said.

She added: “Council is implementing the recommendations of the report. Disciplinary proceedings to this effect are underway. Further information on the details and progress of the disciplinary can be obtained from the council of RIM.”

Khumalo said salary cuts which will be implemented in June will affect employees across the board.

“RIM management has indicated that if this decision is finally implemented, salary cuts will be applied across the board... According to RIM management all employees will be affected,” She said.

Robben Island Museum chairperson Khensani Maluleke said the report could not yet be made public for legal reasons. “The report is one of confidential legal advice and findings prepared by attorneys. It’s the subject of attorney-client privilege, which the museum council has been advised not to waive at this stage. Waiving that privilege and disclosing the legal advice would jeopardise the disciplinary process, the rights of intended witnesses and the rights of the employees concerned,” she said, adding that an executive summary would be made available in due course.

Employees at the island have also been warned about a 50% cut in their salaries from June, following financial issues at the museum due to low visitor numbers during Covid-19 restrictions.

The affected employees were offered the option of taking early retirement or risking retrenchment.

“It’s quite disturbing that, in a small place like Robben Island, you have the CEO earning R2 million annually and senior managers earning from R1.5 million to R1.8 million annually. What are they doing? Now they’re saying there must be salary cuts for other staff members, but not themselves. How can they exclude themselves when it should start with them?” asked Masemola.

In a statement sent to City Press, the museum’s spokesperson, Siphuxolo Mazwi, said the losses it had suffered due to Covid-19 restrictions had forced it to downsize.

“The museum has had to restructure its operations in order to be sustainable in the short term. The prolonged onslaught of Covid-19 has pushed the organisation into crisis mode financially, and the management is now considering various business rationalisation options, with effect from June this year, until such time as there’s a resumption of normal business at the museum,” stated Mazwi.

She dismissed allegations that the museum was currently in ruins.

“The narrative that the buildings on the islands are in ruins is completely devoid of truth, as there’s a maintenance plan in place. Working with key stakeholders in heritage compliance, conservation and built environment, the organisation has further developed its built-in environmental conservation manual, which guides projects on the island,” said Mazwi.

She added that the museum had also cut down on its operating days and times, and was now open only on Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays and weekends.