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Outrage at ministers' free living

No load shedding, water or electricity bills

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THE government has come under fire for defending the provision of free water and electricity for Cabinet ministers living at state residences.

In June this year, President Cyril Ramaphosa had approved a 3% salary increase for his executive, MPs, and MPLs, effectively ballooning ministers' remuneration to R2 473 682 per annum, and their deputies' salaries to R2 037 129.

While ministers and their deputies did not pay for utilities like water and electricity, they were also not subject to load shedding while living at their official residences.

Organisation Undoing Tax Abuse (Outa) chairperson Wayne Duvenage said Ramaphosa and his cabinet's freeloading on electricity, rent and water rates is "clearly an indication of how politicians continuously distance themselves from the daily realities and pain that are felt by the public".

Duvenage made reference to ministerial houses dotted around upmarket suburbs such as Rondebosch and Bishopscourt, saying: "This is very wrong. It's actually disgusting. They don't experience the pain they cause to the public. It's a wrong perk for them to have."

"We are on record as saying all ministers should be forced to go to a public hospital, but they have private health care, or they go to Russia for health care."

Founding secretary-general of the SA Federation of Trade Unions (Saftu), Zwelinzima Vavi, said he was "disgusted, but not surprised" at the government's explanation for their state privileges.

"We are in the situation of the *Animal Farm*. If you look at the statement of the government, it is the most worrying statement we will ever come across," he told eNCA.

"Basically, the government says we are not providing these free water and electricity services to people residing in their private residences, but we are providing to those we are also giving free houses."

"The houses are provided by the taxpayer and (the government is saying) we feel that there is nothing wrong with us giving them free

houses, free electricity, free water, free rates that the municipality would have demanded if these were just ordinary people. And they see nothing wrong."

He said it was ridiculous for the government, in that same statement, to urge the South African public to pay for services.

"Can you believe it, that we live in a country where the ministers are simply living in their ivory towers, completely isolated from the crisis that is unfolding in the country?"

"They were here when Saftu and countless other working-class formations staged a 24-hour national shut-down. People are saying they can no longer afford to live in this country. The cost of living is escalating beyond their salaries and government pensions," he said.

Vavi said the government's remarks were "extremely arrogant".

Reacting to weekend newspaper reports, the government issued a statement clarifying that "as stipulated in the Ministerial Handbook, which contains guidelines for members of the executive, the Department of Public Works and Infrastructure is responsible for the costs associated with the provision of water and electricity to any state-owned residence".

Spokesperson for the government Phumla Williams said the department was bound by government prescriptions to accommodate members of the executive.

"The Department of Public Service and Administration sets out the provisions in the Ministerial Handbook. These provisions are part of the package that comes with being a member of the executive," she said.

The department also noted that official residences where ministers and their deputies resided were exempt from load shedding.

"Remember, just like the president's residence is a national key point, those residences, because of the fact that they host members of the executive, they also become national key points," departmental spokesperson Moses Mushi told *Newzroom Afrika*.

"Ministers, at their private residences, still get load shedding. The members do have their own homes in whatever province they might be coming from, where they continue to pay for their water and electricity."