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Protest over land

Villiersdorp evictees also taking department

to court over 'illegal evictions'

Mitzi Buys

Disillusioned residents staged a peaceful protest on Wednesday 25 January outside Caledon court while awaiting their appearance.

The 28 families who illegally occupied dilapidated, unoccupied structures at the Dennehof Resort at the Theewaterskloof Dam, outside Villiersdorp, brought a case against the Department of Public Works and Infrastructure, claiming they were illegally evicted from the premises.

Before the court proceedings started *Hermanus Times* spoke to Gradwin Swarts, spokesperson for the evictees. "Dennehof has in the past been a place where our communities gathered for functions," he said. "My parents even got married there, but for the past 12 years the place just stood there empty and neglected. The structures have been vandalised. Water pipes, electricity cables, doors and geysers have been stolen.

"We have a huge housing problem in Villiersdorp, especially in our mainly coloured community. We earn too much to qualify for RDP housing, but too little to qualify for gap housing or a bank loan. We were all born in Villiersdorp and grew up here, but we are backyard dwellers and have been our whole lives.

"We saw an opportunity to move into

the unoccupied structures. We know this was wrong, but we just wanted a roof over our heads. We, on our own, attempted to make these structures liveable by putting in windows and doors."

Swarts said the group started occupying the structures on 2 February 2022, and by the 4th or 5th they were all occupied by various people from the community. "On Sunday 6 February the Department of Public Works arrived there and asked us to vacate the premises by Monday 7 February. We

decided not to leave, so the department put security in place. If you left the premises you were not allowed back in. We used alternatives, through the bushes, to get to work and to return at night, which was obviously not very safe.

"On Saturday 12 February security started breaking windows and removing people from the structures, and I said to a number of people we should all go and sit in one of them. We were sitting on the ground when stun grenades were thrown in from outside. We just

grabbed the few belongings we had and then we were evicted. "Our belongings, such as curtains, bedding and furniture were removed by security. The Department of Public Works claims there were only four people there that day. It saw four people sitting on the lawn, but all 28 families were there that day.

"On Friday 11 February, the day before the evictions, we had a meeting with the department and representatives from Theewaterskloof Municipality. When we entered the meeting room it was obvious to us the department had already made up its mind.

"They told us they do not deal with communities and we are the municipality's problem. Public Works never worried about that property in the past, but now it pays security companies to ensure we don't enter the property."

Swarts added the group just wanted to be put back in the structures, where they had stayed at their own cost and started renovating.

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Heleen Jaarsen in front of the court. Photo: Mitzi Buys