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DELAYS

Political parties disappointed over Parliament repairs

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POLITICAL parties say they are disappointed with the government's effort to repair the National Assembly. The parties said it was disappointing that the government had not been able to come up with a clear plan to rebuild the affected structures since Parliament was set alight on January 2, 2022.

Monday marked exactly a year since a blaze gutted the National Assembly chamber and destroyed sections of the Old Assembly building. The fire also affected key offices, including chambers and meeting rooms.

This has resulted in the 2022 State of the Nation Address (Sona) being moved to Cape Town City Hall, a first in the history of South Africa's constitutional democracy. In August, the new secretary to Parliament, Xolile George, said that it would cost over R2 billion and take at least three years to restore Parliament to the way it was before the fire.

At that stage, all technical assessments were completed. In October, Finance Minister Enoch Godongwana announced that Treasury had availed the R2 billion for the rebuilding of Parliament. Godongwana said that the national legislature would also receive another R118 million to deal with interim relocation costs and prepare for its refurbishment.

However, according to political parties, the rebuilding had yet to start.

They said they didn't understand why it was taking so long for the government to start the rebuilding process.

Congress of the People (Cope)



FIREFIGHTERS battling the Parliament blaze in January last year. | ARMAND HOUGH / African News Agency (ANA)

spokesperson Dennis Bloem said: "The burning down of the Parliament building is a very painful matter. To make it worse, is that there is absolutely no effort to rebuild the structure, we don't know why it took so long just to start with the rebuilding, totally unacceptable," said Bloem.

He said the government must also look for a suitable building to temporarily house the 400 members of Parliament. Bloem said MPs could not continue to have virtual sittings.

"These people must attend sittings of Parliament physically. They are being paid by taxpayers' money and cannot continue to have virtual sitting, remember it is more than three years that Parliament is not functioning 100% when you add the more than two years of the Covid-19 period. Parliament is paralysed," he said.

Bloem also called on the Speaker of Parliament, Nosiviwe Mapisa-Nqakula, to utilise the Union Building for the State of the Nation Address. He said

this would cut the cost of the event. "The country is going through a very difficult economic situation, and we cannot afford to spend money recklessly," Bloem said.

The sentiments were echoed by African Christian Democratic Party (ACDP) leader, Kenneth Meshoe, who said he would be writing to the Speaker to demand a weekly report on the progress. He said it was disappointing that it had taken so long to make the assessment and to find the right bidder. Meshoe said the process should not have taken more than 12 months.

"We are all disappointed. I think it is only after criticism from Nehawu that they managed to come and say we have made progress. But it appears like they are dragging their feet and struggling to make up their minds on what they really want," he said.

Meshoe said members of Parliament were not happy not meeting physically. He said they were tired of virtual meetings.

"These virtual meetings have their own disadvantages. They took a year to decide to approve the contractor and they could also take more than five years to rebuild.

"The sooner they start, the better. We need weekly updates on the progress. If this matter is prioritised, I don't think why it should take a week to update members of Parliament," said Meshoe.

DA's chief whip in Parliament, Sivwiwe Gwarube, said the party's concern was the fact that no concrete investigation, separate from the criminal justice process, had been done.

She said Parliament remained in the dark about what caused the secu-

urity breach and who should be held accountable.

"This remains a priority for us," said Gwarube. "Added to this and perhaps importantly, we want to ensure that Parliament finds an alternative venue that would be suitable to be used during the time that Parliament is being rebuilt. We cannot keep using the City Hall for special gatherings and the Good Hope Chamber, which only houses a fraction of the MPs for the next four years while the rebuilding process commences," she said.

Asked what is delaying the rebuilding process, Department of Public Works spokesperson, Zara Nicholson, said questions should be referred to Parliament as the department submitted the COEGA report on the extent of repairs and estimated costs to Parliament earlier this year. Nicholson said Parliament now has to decide on the way forward.

Parliament spokesperson Moloto Mothapo refused to comment, saying the information would be announced soon, as per the Parliament statement issued on January 2. In the statement, Mothapo said Mapisa-Nqakula and the chairperson of the National Council of Provinces, Amos Masondo, would later this week share with the nation details of the rebuilding programme, the project time frames and other relevant information at a press conference.

Mothapo said the real work of restoring Parliament would intensify this year.

Zandile Mafe was linked to the incident and arrested on the same day. Mafe, who has been appearing at the Western Cape High Court, is due back on January 27.