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OPINION

Challenge of housing people is like chasing a moving target

THE BEGINNING OF September this year will be a significant milestone as it will mark 100 days since I assumed the political helm of the office of the two critical built-environment infrastructure departments in the Provincial Executive Council (PEC) of KwaZulu-Natal, namely Human Settlements and Public Works.

When I was sworn in as the MEC this year during a PEC reconfiguration I had no illusion about the daunting task that lay ahead of me.

Whilst shying away from employing the overused cliché that "I hit the ground running" but figuratively and literally speaking, that is what transpired since that fateful day in May.

Between then and now, quite a lot has happened within the two portfolios. On assuming office my private cellular phone number has received a deluge of requests for interventions either in human settlements, provisioning of someone with a rickety make-shift falling mud house structure or intervention in infrastructure shortcomings, be it a school or clinic or hospital.

It has been a roller-coaster of criss-crossing the province's 11 district municipalities, including eThekweni Metro. Yesterday I completed my visits to all the 11 districts as I was in Harry Gwala District Municipality's Mzimkhulu Local Municipality which had been the only district municipality I had not set foot in since assuming office.

I have conducted a number of Siyahlohlola Operations at both departments' projects and have done a number of housing project launches and handovers. In addition, I have officiated at title deeds handover ceremonies in Quarry Heights and Mandeni Local Municipality's Inyoni



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Housing Project, thus affirming the security of tenure to many residents and enhancing the value of their government-issued properties.

Eradicating the backlog in the issuing of title deeds remains one of the priorities that I intend to tackle prior to the unfolding of the term of office of the sixth administration.

I have also attended to incidents of massive shack fires in Ugu and eThekweni where two lives were sadly lost.

Among the stalled projects that I have been able to unblock include the ongoing construction work at Umlazi's Menzi High School where business forums had stopped work, demanding extortion money.

I have also initiated a programme to unblock stalled housing projects in various parts of the province and visited two massive informal settlements upgrade housing projects and this is the subject of my contribution to this guest column.

Just this week, I visited Austerville, south of Durban, where a community had invaded the department's temporary housing units being used to temporarily shelter families whose apartments are being refurbished by the department. This resulted in the refurbishment project being stalled from last December.

During the community engage-

ment meeting this past Monday, I announced an intervention to build 201 flats in line with my organisation's non-racial outlook when solving community problems because as the ANC we provide service delivery across all our communities.

We derive our mandate as the Department of Human Settlements from the fundamental liberation struggle blueprint document of the majority party, namely the Freedom Charter.

Most of our policy instruments in the Department of Human Settlements are informed by the Freedom Charter.

The recent fires at Masinenge Informal Settlement near Margate in Ray Nkonyeni Local Municipality in Ugu District Municipality and in Kennedy Road Informal Settlement in Springfield in eThekweni Municipality are a testimony to the effect of rapid urbanisation and migration patterns closer to economic opportunities for many people.

Our province has a combination of rural and urban settlements, with a housing backlog estimated at over 700 000, according to the 2016 community survey.

There are a high number of informal settlements surrounding primary economic hubs and secondary cities of eThekweni Metro, Ray Nkonyeni, Newcastle, Alfred Duma, KwaDukuza, uMhlathuze and uMsunduzi Municipalities.

Over 393 167 households are living in informal settlements across the province, with 730 informal settlements of the 937 informal settlements in the province located in eThekweni Metro. So, this translates to 77.9 % of KZN informal settlements are in eThekweni.

The key priorities of the department during the current financial year

include the upgrading of informal settlements and we have 66 projects in planning whilst we are busy with the installation of internal services in two projects.

Our province is prone to natural disasters, such as heavy rain storms that had a severe impact over the last two years as evidenced by last year's April and May devastating floods that rendered more than 4 000 people homeless and most of the floods' displaced victims were from informal settlements in eThekweni and Msunduzi Municipalities and are currently sheltered at Transitional Emergency Accommodation (TEA) facilities.

Despite progressive legislation and policies such as the Interim Services Policy applying to informal settlements wherein municipalities are obligated to provide basic water and sanitation as well as electricity and the creation of pathways for emergency services vehicles to access informal settlements in instances of disasters such as fires, it would appear as government in all the four spheres of national, provincial, district municipality and local municipality have been taking aim shooting at a moving target.

As the progressive provincial government of KwaZulu-Natal, we have adamantly refused to fall prey to a narrow reactionary and retrogressive stance of questioning the place of origin of the majority of the people presently inhabiting the informal settlements in our province.

We remain guided by the Freedom Charter principle that says "South Africa belongs to all those who live in it" and as descendants of our first Nobel Laureate and former General President of the ANC, iNkosi Albert Mvumbi John Luthuli, we would be failing him and his noble teachings

if we were to engage in backwards discriminatory behaviour.

The people of Matimatolo, Mbulwane, Mvuzane, KwaMondi, Dondotha, Jika Joe in Msunduzi, Umhlabuyilangana, Jozini, KwaZondi and Ekukhanyeni in Nkandla and KwaZungu in Ulundi and Ward 11 in eThekweni Municipality's Quarry Heights remain our irrefutable witnesses to our sustained programme of restoring the dignity of the downtrodden.

In bringing service delivery to our people we do so fully politically blinkered as we don't see them as IFP, NFP, ANC, DA or EFF supporting communities but we see them as people of KwaZulu-Natal who for years have also suffered the vagaries of the past repressive system.

We shall continue unabated with much more vigour and unseen robustness in our pursuit of justice in human settlements provisioning across the length and breadth of our beautiful province.

Despite all this, it is not gloom and doom as there are pockets of excellence as recently witnessed with the relocation of Isiphingo Transit Camp residents to the new Nkaku Road Housing Project and the first letting in of Jika Joe Informal Settlement residents to the nearby Jika Joe Community Residential Units.

We remain optimistic that with much vigour and dedication, we shall overcome the challenges we are facing. We are steadfast in the pursuit of our department's slogan that "Umntu ungumuntu ngek'haya" and that "There shall be houses, security and comfort for all".

Nkosi is the MEC for Human Settlements and Public Works in KwaZulu-Natal.