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The Castle was built between 1666 and 1679, after the arrival of Dutchman Jan van Riebeeck.



Shamiela Mohamed, one of the homeless people living at the Castle, says she hopes the government can offer her better accommodation. Picture: Michael Walker

# News Invasion

Sunday Times

## Battle looms as homeless invade Castle

City threatens court action if government fails to evict squatters

By **BOBBY JORDAN** and **PHILANI NOMBEMBE**

● The Castle of Good Hope, for centuries a symbol of colonial conquest, has finally met its match with an invasion of homeless shack dwellers occupying part of the famous tourist attraction in Cape Town. But the outcome may eventually be settled on a different battlefield – the law courts. About 100 people are taking refuge in

makeshift plastic shelters in squalid conditions on a corner of the Castle property. They do not want to move into managed shelter facilities, but insist they have nowhere else to go, having fled worse circumstances on the Cape Flats. They want alternative accommodation. "There has to be something better than this," said Shamiela Mohamed, standing next to her waterlogged home of cardboard and plastic sheeting. "We are just doing whatever we can to survive – every day something different." The community that sprang up during lockdown has evaded eviction and the national monument's exterior is now an eyesore, the moat polluted and clogged with waste. There are health concerns due to a lack of ablution facilities and intensifying cold weather. Residents wash their clothes in

the dirty moat and hang sodden laundry and bedding on the Castle railing. The Castle was built between 1666 and 1679, after the arrival of Dutchman Jan van Riebeeck, who set up a trading station for the Dutch East India Company. It is the oldest existing colonial building, replacing an earlier fort built for Van Riebeeck out of clay and timber. The future of the occupied site involves a

complex web of land ownership and contestation within levels of government itself, resulting in the homeless occupying some areas but are kept out of others. The main area of occupation is owned by the department of public works & infrastructure on behalf of the Passenger Rail Agency of South Africa. Other sections are owned by the city and the military. Frustrated heritage stakeholders are

powerless to intervene and await action by public works. Cape Town mayor Geordin Hill-Lewis issued an ultimatum to public works last week, saying that if steps were not taken to evict the illegal occupants by June 16, the city would go to court "to ensure the site is restored, on a just and equitable basis". Asked for an update this week, the city said: "We note the commitments that they will engage with us. The city will take this forward collegially with [public works] next week." The conciliatory tone is in contrast to last week's fighting talk from Hill-Lewis in a letter to public works minister Sibhe Zikalala, saying the property was not fit for human habitation. "We sincerely hope this [legal action by the city] will not be necessary and that you will now instruct your officials – and the state attorney – to take the necessary urgent action to initiate court proceedings for an order to relocate the unlawful occupants around the Castle, and to ensure the area is secured after relocation to prevent a similar occupation," he wrote. Hill-Lewis said visitor numbers had declined by 90%. Public works scoffed at these "prima donna" comments, saying the delay was due to difficulty finding a solution to the complex problem. "This is one of the matters the minister is dealing with within the framework of our legislation," said ministry spokesperson Lennox Mabasa. "In the spirit of intergovernmental relations, the minister will not pub-

licly grandstand but will engage the mayor and all stakeholders through established channels in our system of governance. The minister wishes to warn about overzealous postures that are reckless and will only serve to exacerbate challenges rather than resolve them." Calvyn Gillellan, CEO of the Castle of Good Hope who oversees heritage aspects of the national monument, hoped the occupied site could, ultimately, be used as a memorial. There was already a plan to fence off the area, but stakeholders are still waiting for a final decision from public works. He was weary of the homeless becoming collateral in a game of "political football" but the squalid conditions, he added, were unfit for human habitation. "Out of the misery we could develop some kind of garden of memory that recognises our past – that we are still slitting with inequality. Maybe there can be some memorial that links the past with the present. We can overcome whatever structural impediments there are to resolve this problem," Gillellan said. He denied the informal settlement had caused a sharp decline in visitor numbers and said the Castle had rebounded from 33,500 visitors in the 2021/22 tourist season to 66,966 in 2022/23. "But from a humanity point of view one can't allow people to live like that. And from an international showcasings point of view, it is not the way you want to showcase the entrance to the city," Gillellan said.