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W Cape pays R160m to beat Mafia

Construction extortion 'fuelled by politics'

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THE Provincial Department of Infrastructure's Human Settlements branch has spent more than R161.7 million on security to mitigate the extortion tactics of construction Mafia and illegal occupation of vacant land and homes under construction.

Infrastructure MEC Tertuis Simmers told the Legislature that the illegal occupation of vacant land and housing units under construction remained a key challenge and the department faced a heightened security environment due to the disruptions and stoppages of projects through the extortion tactics of construction Mafia.

Presenting his department's 2022/23 end-of-year performance outcomes, Simmers said: "By the end of the year, the department spent more than R161.7 million on security to mitigate this scourge, with 125 housing opportunities being lost."

Standing committee on infrastructure chairperson Matlhodi Maseko (DA) alleged there was a political connection to the construction Mafia.

Maseko said: "Here in the Western Cape, it is a well-known allegation that there are certain political parties who play an active role in extortion in some communities, and we look forward to the law running its course."

Maseko asked Simmers about collaborating with the police on the issue of construction Mafia, and he said there were currently eight ongoing investigations into cases of extortion related to construction activities in Cape Town. He said the eight investigations included four cases in Manenberg, one in Delft, one in Milnerton and two in Gugulethu.

Simmers said the cases were centred on unlawful material supply, site security breaches, demolitions and acts of intimidation, adding that the problem was not just in the Western Cape but countrywide.

Asked by ANC finance spokesperson Nomi Nkondlo whether he had roped in the services of the City, and in particular Mayco member for safety

and security JP Smith into his pursuit of the construction Mafia, Simmers said he was working closely with all stakeholders.

Simmers said: "To counteract the widespread impact of extortion across the entire province, the department has implemented a comprehensive prevention plan.

"This proactive strategy encompasses not only internal stakeholders but also external ones such as project steering committees and ward councillors, all of whom play vital roles in executing this plan."

Meanwhile, on Sunday, Public Works and Infrastructure Minister Sihle Zikalala said he was confident his department would eventually win the war against the construction Mafia.

Zikalala announced that the government was setting up a call centre to allow the sector to report any disruption at construction sites.

He said the call centre would allow law enforcement to act quickly against those involved in extortion, hijacking and disruption.

"While the practice is still rife and keeps morphing to other areas using intimidation as a tactic, we are confident that we will overcome this criminal practice.

"To assist the construction sector, we are establishing a call centre for speedy reporting of construction disruptions, and this will support the assigned law enforcement units to this priority crime," Zikalala said.

In July, Zikalala said some 600 people had been arrested in connection with the construction Mafia.

The industry has called for building contracts from now on to be amended to cater for the delays and demands on sites, saying that it should not be robbed of earnings by social disruptions, which were the terrain of government mainly as the client.

Black Business Council (BBC) spokesperson Gregory Mofokeng said: "We need to protect contractors. Standing time for sites disrupted must be paid for. We are not builders and not equipped to deal with social facilitation."