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CONSTRUCTION MAFIA

# Western Cape spends R161.7m on security for building sites

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THE Western Cape Department of Infrastructure's Human Settlements branch has spent more than R161.7 million on security to mitigate the extortion tactics of the so-called "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 stop-

pages 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 R161.7m 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 eight ongoing investigations into cases of extortion related to construction activities in Cape Town.

They 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 countrywide.

Earlier this week, 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.

The centre would allow law enforcement to act quickly against those involved in extortion, hijacking and disruption, he said.

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

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

Speaking during a panel discussion

on construction mafia issues, he said the government was establishing a special task force to address the growing phenomenon.

He also challenged the construction industry to identify and allocate community subcontracts from early stages of project development.

There have been calls from the industry for the establishment of a construction master plan as has been done in other sectors.

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