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A PROBE into the fire that gutted Parliament last year has found that minimum physical standards of security measures were not adhered to, and that enabled Parliament to be breached without detection. | PHANDO JIKELO African News Agency (ANA)

'HUMAN ERROR'

Parliament fire could have been avoided: probe

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A PROBE into the fire that gutted Parliament last year has found that minimum physical security measures were not adhered to, and that enabled Parliament to be breached without detection.

Briefing the media on the internal investigation's findings on Wednesday, secretary to Parliament Xolile George said lax security standards contributed to the breaches on the day of the devastating fire that damaged the Old and New Assembly buildings. "Those issues allowed a person to gain unauthorised access. Not only that, but he enjoyed unrestricted movement within Parliament without being detected for a number of hours beyond a day," George said.

He was referring to Zandile Christmas Mafe, who appeared in the Western Cape High Court over the incident.

"One such measure that is attributed – I call it a human error – was the decision not to deploy parliamentary protection officers at night, on public holidays and weekends during 2021/22," George said.

The investigation also found a range of systems and maintenance failures that contributed to security breaches and failure to prevent and contain the fire. "These failures encompassed issues such as the height of the perimeter fence, the absence of perimeter monitoring, a malfunctioning emergency exit door, deficiencies in fire panels, and an unreliable Remrad (remote monitoring) system.

"The absence of on-site parliamentary protection services officers further resulted in a lack of CCTV monitoring within the precinct," George said. Parliament's perimeter fence was flagged



SECRETARY to Parliament Xolile George said the minimum security standards directly contributed to the security breaches on the day of the devastating fire that damaged the Old Assembly and New Assembly buildings. | ARMAND HOUGH African News Agency (ANA)

as far back as 2004 by the SAPS.

"Lapses in perimeter monitoring were identified, including an incident where SAPS officers tasked with monitoring a motion-detection camera had been asleep when an intruder could move in and breach the fence. The investigation raised questions regarding SAPS patrols during that period, and identified additional complications such as the number of malfunctioning CCTV cameras on a video wall, and a problematic emergency exit door."

The report also found non-compliance with fire regulations and requirements that included smoke detectors, fire alarm panels, emergency notification systems, sprinkler systems and evacuation route planning.

George said remedial action had been recommended, including the urgent implementation of recommendations of the BDO report, SAPS security risk assessments and the appointment of a head of security. "An exhaustive evaluation of fire com-

pliance for all Parliament buildings, guided by a qualified fire engineer, will be conducted, and a coherent fire plan will be designed and implemented."

The report recommended consequence management in cases where breaches were attributable to people who may be role-players and were charged with responsibilities.

At least five officials were implicated in a number of failures, including failure to implement security policies, to ensure compliance with occupational health and safety standards and to establish a security committee, as required. The officials will be subjected to other processes to determine if they should undergo disciplinary hearings.

"It does not mean that we will be saying the five officials will go for consequence management tomorrow," George said. The findings on matters related to the Department of Public Works and Infrastructure and SAPS would be disclosed in the appropriate forum, he added.

The National Treasury allocated R2 billion for the restoration of Parliament and a further R118 million to help the national legislature respond to unforeseen costs due to the fire.

DA chief whip Siviwe Gwarube said that while they awaited the release of the full, unabridged report, George's revelations were deeply troubling.

Gwarube said she would write to the presiding officers, urging them to urgently table the report before the joint standing committee of financial management to Parliament.

"We need to understand who is to be held accountable and how the executive authority will take responsibility for the fire that will be remembered for decades to come. Accountability must begin in Parliament before it can be exercised over the executive," she said.