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# Disaster agency needed

**NO POLITICAL WILL:** RESPONSE TO SEVERAL RECENT CRISES NOT OPTIMAL

→ 'Something must break because there is more money in it for authorities.'

**Lunga Simelane**

**S**ince 2020, South Africa has experienced several disasters, man-made and natural, and an expert has noted the country is not prepared for them.

During the Covid pandemic, the country recorded more than 102 595 deaths.

In April 2022, the KwaZulu-Natal coastal zone – including the greater Durban area and South Coast – received more than 300mm of rain in 24 hours. This led to calamitous flooding, with 459 people losing their lives and 88 people were still missing by the end of May that year.

More than 4 000 homes were destroyed, 40 000 people left homeless and 45 000 people were temporarily left unemployed.

Just last month, a landslip hit parts of Inanda Valley in KZN, which caused extensive damage to homes and other buildings, and in Gauteng, people were awoken by a powerful 4.4-magnitude earthquake.

Then, a national state of disaster was declared due to floods in Mpumalanga, KwaZulu-Natal, the Eastern Cape, Gauteng, Northern Cape and Limpopo.

Six of the country's nine provinces were affected.

Political analyst Goodenough Mashego said the reason most of these crises became disasters when they should not have was politics.

According to Mashego, it was clear SA was not immune to disasters.

Looking at some of the more advanced countries, there were national mechanisms to deal with disasters.

"The United States, for example, has a national agency called the Federal Emergency Management Agency [Fema] which deals with such issues and cuts through the red tape of state to do whatever needs to be done, when it's supposed to be done," he said.

"The problems we have in politics are provincial leaders being given so much power, and there is a lot of bad management."

In regard to all the disasters and incidents which took place, Mashego said the biggest worry for South Africans was, if there was money to spend to alleviate citizens' distress, would it be properly spent.

"The Covid pandemic has shown us when you compartmentalise the spending of money on disasters, money becomes very easily misappropriated," he said.

"Given the South African experience, even if you set up some-



**SPECTATORS.** Onlookers yesterday look at the damage on Bree Street in Johannesburg after a underground explosion caused major damage on Wednesday. Picture Neil McCartney



**RAY OF SUNSHINE.** Gauteng MEC for health and wellness Nomantu Nkomo-Ralehoko at Charlotte Maxeke Hospital yesterday after visiting people injured on Bree Street on Wednesday. Picture: Michel Bega

thing like a Fema, an agency that should report to disaster nationally, we are going to be stuck with incompetent people and the response rate will be slow.

"You need an agency that does not work on quotations, one that does not rely on the central supplier database (a database of organisations, institutions and individuals who can provide goods and services to government)."

"You will find people running around with quotations and appointing individuals of interest to [handle the] emergency, which shows the lack of political will."

As most of the disasters resulted in responsibility being issued on different levels, Mashego said one national agency which

could respond to fires, tornadoes, earthquakes, explosions or any other disaster was required.

"But also even if there was a political will, the question is – will that agency not become a tender agency?" he asked.

"Or could it actually be something attached to public works, because they have got the biggest ability to do the things which can run at the go without really subcontracting provinces where there is the biggest bureaucracy."

On Wednesday, dozens of people, including commuters, were injured following a suspected gas line explosion in the Joburg central business district (CBD).

This came just two weeks after at least 16 people, including wom-

en and children, died when a gas cylinder containing nitrate oxide leaked at the Angelo informal settlement in Boksburg.

The scene in Joburg's CBD was chaotic, with massive cracks and gaping holes on the road.

While the cause of the explosion was still under investigation, Mashego said in SA, something had to break before there was action. "There will be excuses that the infrastructure has aged. It might even end up being a chicken-egg situation," he said.

"They want something to break because if something is broken it will make more money than fixing it – as fixing will require public works."

"It is all about greed and lack of political interests when it comes to supplying service delivery."

Mashego added it was also worrying how citizens continued to expose themselves to danger by being present at accident scenes.

Political analyst Prof Ntsikelelo Breakfast said perhaps SA should consider starting a curriculum at universities which centred on disaster management.

"I think that's where the problem lies. Maybe this is needed so we do not have public officials who are going to work their way up without prior knowledge on disaster management and its impact on policy and planning," he said.

"I think industry should work side by side with universities; maybe people who are practitioners should also play their roles as the public sector is becoming more complex."

"Unlike the offerings of public administration, where there is a lot of stuff which is not aligned to what is happening in practice. We are not keeping up with the trends in practice."

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**It is all about greed**