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# HOW STATE IS TO RECLAIM HIJACKED BUILDINGS

*Zikalala urges private sector to join efforts to restore illegally occupied properties*

OKUHLE HLATI  
okhule.hlati@inl.co.za



PUBLIC Works and Infrastructure Minister Sihle Zikalala has warned the private sector not to “force” government’s hand to expropriate vacant buildings, which he said were proving to be a risk and owed municipal rates.

He spoke at the Property Sector Conference yesterday after conducting inspections at two state properties in Elwyn Court in Hanover Street, Vredehoek, that have been unlawfully occupied for years.

He also stopped at the Castle of Good Hope where homeless people have erected their shelters on a piece of land nearby. Zikalala said they were engaging with the Department of Defence to relocate them and were getting an alternative area for the people to stay.

“We have seen the extent of damage of the two DPWI buildings and will start to look at the process of eviction and what could the properties be used for. We are currently revamping Operation Bring Back by developing a joint operation strategy that will encompass other custodians, relevant departments within the security cluster and other spheres of government with an intention to recover all illegally occupied properties.”

This comes against the backdrop of the tragic fire disaster at the hijacked building in Marshalltown, south of Johannesburg, in which more than 78 people died.

“We recognise that the lack of maintenance of government properties over time has been a cause of concern and has resulted in the buildings being neglected, left vacant, and prone to vandalism. We are also aware that some neglected buildings belonging to both the state and private sector have been hijacked. The department, working with the NPA, AFU, and SIU, has taken people to court and recovered some of its stolen properties. We are addressing how state

land was acquired for the construction of the Pan African Parliament,” said Zikalala.

He said the department was also embarking on an intensive programme of letting out vacant properties to interested investors.

“The programme will be intensified in the 2024/25 financial year. The challenge of vacant buildings is also compounded by the private sector itself, which also leaves buildings unattended as they relocate for a variety of reasons. We call on the private sector to also come forward and attend to the challenge of their vacant buildings and not force the hand of government to expropriate such buildings, which are proving to be a risk and owe municipal rates,” said Zikalala.

He said through the Refurbishment Operate and Transfer Programme (ROTP), the department sought to attract capacity, capital and skills from the private sector to partner with the government to improve the condition of specific facilities.

“With a large portfolio and constrained economic landscape, it is important that to be able to drive service delivery through the use of public infrastructure and preserve the properties, the private sector comes on board as an investment partner. We must work together to transform the property sector, by ensuring that property becomes affordable not only to tenants but to all South Africans,” he added.

Kalk Bay small-scale fishing community representative Faez Poggenpoel said it was paramount to attend the conference because they needed to enquire about lease agreements for key infrastructure such as refrigeration and processing for their traditional fishing heritage they have lived by for decades.

“We have been trying to engage with the department over land owned by the City. The challenge is that land

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## Planned expropriation welcomed

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is either owned by the city, DPWI or Passenger Rail Agency of South Africa (Prasa), so to get any kind of agreement on access to land is very difficult for us.

"We support expropriation and we are happy that the minister actually touched on that because for us that is the only way we can claim some of the land around the harbour precinct that is not being utilised. This could unlock opportunities for our community and would be the best tool to address our challenges. Also, sometimes officials use the excuse that it's a historic area which prevents development, which most of the time is ridiculous. We hope that DPWI really goes strong for this one and their planning so that it doesn't take another 20 years," said Poggenpoel.

He called for leases to be reviewed, to be inclusive and affordable.