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CRIME

'Construction Mafia' cost economy billions

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A NATIONAL forum has been established to co-ordinate cases relating to extortion syndicates in the construction sector.

This was revealed by Public Works Minister Sihle Zikalala, in Durban for a monitoring visit.

He said the government had plans to end this worrying practice once and for all.

The forum would look into all the affected provinces with a focus on extortion-related crimes, attempted murder, common robbery, conspiracy to commit murder, incitement to public violence, contempt and contravention of court orders.

Zikalala visited the Durban High Court renovation project which is part of 20 projects his department was undertaking on behalf of the government in KwaZulu-Natal.

"This was a result of illegal occupation and the hijacking of this site by criminals and gangs extorting money from construction sites, known as the 'construction Mafia'. As you can see, the site is now under

heavy security protection, and this means that unbudgeted costs are now being incurred which must be sourced to provide the space for this project to be completed," the minister said.

He said the project encountered some delays in February last year as the effects of the construction Mafia on building projects across the country reached critical levels.

"Construction Mafias have been a terrible nightmare for construction companies who just want to finish their projects, hence the government is trying to address the issue by drafting policies and legislation to tackle extortion syndicates in the construction sector."

Zikalala said this negatively affected the implementation of construction projects and the country's economic growth.

He condemned these acts, adding that the government, through the Ministry of Police had tasked the Organised Crime Investigations Detective Services as well as the Serious Organised Crime within the Directorate for Priority Crime Investigations (Hawks) to look

into this matter urgently.

According to reports received from the police, Zikalala said a total of 682 cases (132 extortion and 550 extortion-related cases) were being investigated by the Organised Crime Investigations detective services.

Zikalala said the disruption and blockages of construction sites cost the economy more than R68 billion before the pandemic in 186 projects.

According to a report by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime (GI-TOC), the origins of the construction mafia can be traced back to KwaZulu-Natal in 2014, particularly in Umlazi and KwaMashu townships.

Some of the policies the government is drafting to combat this include the Critical Infrastructure Protection Act (CIPA), the National Infrastructure Plan and the Critical Infrastructure Programme.

The CIPA, for example, will repeal the National Key Points Act.

CIPA aims to secure sites, projects and developments on an ongoing basis.