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Crackdown on construction mafia

National forum established by the police to deal with cases across the country

SIBUSISO MBOTO and KAREN SINGH

THE government is cracking down on "construction mafia gangs" disrupting development projects at a severe cost to the economy across the country.

Minister of Public Works Sihle Zikalala said this while he was conducting a visit to sites in Durban.

He said law-enforcement authorities had set up a national forum to co-ordinate the cases in all affected provinces. The Organised Crime Investigations Detective Services as well as the Serious Organised Crime within the Directorate for Priority Crime Investigations were investigating the matters.

He said the focus has been on extortion-related crimes, attempted murder, common robbery, conspiracy to commit murder, incitement to public violence, contempt and contravention of court orders.

"According to reports received from the police, a total of 682 cases are being investigated by the Organised Crime Investigations, Detective Services. Extortion cases are at 132 while extortion-related cases are at 550. To date the police have made 702 arrests."

Zikalala added that according to the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime, the disruption and blockages of construction sites in 186 projects cost the economy more than R68 billion, before the pandemic.

"We re-iterate that those who are interested in doing business within the law will be welcomed and supported but the state will have to act decisively on any criminality and illegality. The State cannot afford to be weak and must have the ability and capability to address extortion economies from expanding their networks."

"These illegal activities cannot be normalised in our country. No business must be complicit and cave into submission to these criminal acts."

He said one project that had been affected by the construction mafia was the Durban High Court upgrade. He said this had resulted in delays due to the "illegal occupation and the hijacking" of the site by criminals intent on extorting money. He said security had been hired for the site to allow the project to be completed.

Meanwhile, newly appointed Kwa-Zulu-Natal Public Works and Human Settlements MEC Siphiso "KK" Nkosi said the department has identified a number of buildings that have been hijacked by criminal elements, including foreign nationals.

The MEC also revealed that he had a meeting with members of the ANC

uMkhonto We Sizwe Military Veterans Association who expressed a desire to work with the department in reclaiming the hijacked buildings.

While Nkosi could not give stats on the number of hijacked buildings, he said an audit had been done.

"I don't have that, but Public Works told me the audit was done and I'm waiting for the report from Ms Mncube (a senior department official)," Nkosi said.

The issue of government-owned buildings being used for illegal purposes, including drug trafficking, has been one of the sources of concern for the government, lawmakers and the public.

Nkosi's undertaking was prompted by a call from the National Freedom Party's Member of the Provincial Legislature (MPL) Mbali Shinga for the government to do something about government buildings that were idle, and often used for the wrong purposes.

Speaking during the sitting of the legislature last week, the MPL noted that the KZN population was growing rapidly and needed to get services from the government.

"It seems as if the department is failing in its mandate since we have a number of government buildings and properties that have become white elephants or havens of thugs which are used to terrorise communities," said the MPL.

She listed a number of properties in Ugu District on the South Coast, which she said were meant to be used to house government employees but had been left unattended and eventually got vandalised.

Nkosi told the sitting that they had formulated a plan to deal with the hijacking of buildings.

"We would like to confirm that we have identified a number of buildings that have been hijacked by criminal elements, especially foreign nationals, and we are busy auditing that," the MEC said at the sitting. He added that the department, working with other role players, including the police, would be systematic when rolling out the clean-up, and would ensure that once the criminals were removed, the buildings are used for appropriate purposes.

"We are going to start with two buildings in the metro that have been identified by the veterans and move to other parts of the province," the MEC told the sitting.

One of the MKMVA leaders in KZN, Babji Sithole, said they were keen to work with the government in ensuring that the government buildings were put to good use.

CHALLENGE



HUNDREDS of participants took part in the Durban SPAR Women's 10.5km Challenge yesterday. | DOCTOR NGCOBO African News Agency (ANA) See Page 4

POOR HYGIENE

Restaurants fined in City's clean-up campaign

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AN ONGOING clean-up campaign by the eThekweni Municipality has led to fines for several businesses, including restaurants that violate the City's health and safety standards.

One restaurant was fined for lack of cleanliness, and cockroaches were found there.

The City has termed the campaign "Good Hope".

It stressed yesterday that this general ongoing clean-up action was not aimed at particular establishments.

The Municipality is aware of at least two businesses at a popular shopping centre that were fined for health code and safety violations.

The City's Environmental Health officers from the West 4 Office in Westville are said to be cracking the whip on food outlets to ensure compliance with safety and food standards.

One restaurant was fined R5 000 for contraventions, including having cockroaches and dirty conditions.

Another restaurant received a fine of R4 000 for operating without a business licence and not having a fire permit or hot water.

The enforcement team consisted of members from Business Licensing, the Fire Department, and the metro police.

The head of communications in eThekweni Municipality, Lindiwe Khuzwayo, said this was not a targeted campaign but a clean-up operation that was being carried out by the municipality throughout the City.

"This is an ongoing action by the municipality, it's not a target thing," said the municipal spokesperson, adding that this action was led by multiple teams from the municipality with many functions.

She added that similar operations had taken place in other parts of the City.

"We have carried out similar actions in the uMhlabi and Clairwood areas. It's just part of normal operations."

TOUGH TIMES

Tourism industry hoping for holidays boost

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WITH just days to go before the Hollywoodbets Durban July, KwaZulu-Natal tourism establishments are hoping the premier horse-racing event and other activities this winter school holidays will boost their businesses.

The KwaZulu-Natal Department of Economic Development, Tourism and Environmental Affairs (Edtea) said it was expecting at least R1.4 billion to be added to the province's economy over the winter holidays.

Edtea MEC Sibomiso Duma said based on current hotel and B&B bookings, KZN could expect at least 430 821 domestic tourists and 48 842 international tourists during June and July.

"This will provide a combined direct spend of more than R1.4bn for the provincial economy. We are expecting as much as 70% of domestic tourists and 60% of international travellers to visit the province during the four weeks from mid-June to mid-July."

Duma added that Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife had been successful in growing

its tourist numbers post Covid-19.

"From April 2022 to April 2023, the number of visitors to Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife facilities increased by 65%, from almost 40 000 to just over 66 000 beating their 2019 figure of 56 385."

Duma said the department wanted to see an increase in the number of domestic and international tourists as the province rebuilds and expands the tourism sector.

"Events to look out for in July, include the Durban Film Festival, the Ballito Pro-surfing contest, the Hollywoodbets Durban July and the Dundee July, a traditional rural horse-racing event."

Brett Tungay, Federated Hospitality Association of SA (Fedhasa) East Coast chairperson, said the industry was optimistic about the holidays.

"We are hopeful that the winter school holidays will help the hospitality and tourism sector. I wouldn't say the sector is flourishing; the high five-star accommodation has done well since the Covid-19 pandemic. The middle-class three star and four star accommodation establishments are still struggling and

in a recovery phase. I think we can attribute this to load shedding and the state of the economy."

Tungay added that it appeared that the number of international visitors visiting KZN was not enough and there needed to be more effort to attract them.

Lizelle Young, a guest house owner in Margate on the South Coast, said that business had been tough.

"I just haven't had enough bookings. It's difficult to tell whether it's things like load shedding that affect business or just the tough economic times. However, I am hoping that the winter holidays will boost business."

Otto Khuzwayo, the owner of Nokusho, Events and Guest House based in uMhlabuli, said business had been slow.

"It's tough times, it could well be that people just don't have money to spend. The money is just enough to make ends meet. We are just hoping for the best with the Durban July taking place this weekend. It will attract a lot of tourists and the school holidays will see more parents wanting to take their kids on holidays."