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Millions spent to keep lights on for cabinet ministers and deputies

By **THABO MOKONE**

● As South Africans suffer under load-shedding, ministers and their deputies have been shielded from blackouts by the government spending more than R7m to buy generators and inverters for them at their official homes.

It emerged in parliament this week that the department of public works has been "procuring and installing alternative power supply systems" at ministerial homes in Pretoria's affluent suburbs such as Waterkloof at a cost of R7.04m since 2019.

These alternative power supply systems include generators, solar systems and inverters that keep the lights burning and appliances on for ministers and their deputies while ordinary taxpayers remain in the dark during load-shedding.

This was revealed by new public works minister Sihle Zikalala in response to written questions by DA MP Leon Schreiner.

Zikalala's revelations are at odds with the stance taken by minister in the Presidency Khumbudzo Ntshavheni, who said last week in response to an accusation that ministerial homes were not subjected to load-shedding: "That is a fallacy."

Ntshavheni on Saturday referred questions to Zikalala.

Zikalala, who was appointed to his position last month, yesterday questioned "whether this benefit should have been given to the ministers or not".

He said South Africans were correct to be outraged by the installation of generators and inverters at ministerial homes and he would announce a new government position on the matter in the coming weeks.

"Yes, it's a point, it's a valid one. It needs to be considered; we should all ensure that we save all resources.

"It's a cry that should be noted, especially in the current situation; it's a cry that we should not downplay," said Zikalala.

"We should say, based on what's happening now, what is needed and what needs to be reduced to save costs for the government. And that's why I would not want to play to the gallery and say these will be terminated now. I'm saying give us a few days to conduct a well-informed report and then be able to address the nation on that."

As if the spending on ministerial generators and inverters was not enough, ministers and deputy ministers enjoy taxpayer-sponsored water and electricity at their state-allocated homes in Pretoria, at a cost to taxpayers of R22m since 2019.

A further R25m was spent during the same period on water and electricity bills racked up at ministerial homes in Cape Town.

In addition, R3.4m was spent on "security upgrades" at the homes of ministers and deputy ministers in top Cape Town suburbs.

Each of the 29 ministers and their 37 deputies is allocated two official houses, one in Pretoria, the seat of national government, and another in Cape Town, where parliament is located.

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Title: `Rock star ministers lounge around their luxury mansions`

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'Rock star ministers lounge around their luxury mansions'

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In terms of the ministerial handbook, taxpayer-sponsored electricity and water bills for ministers and their deputies are capped at R5,000 per month per house, and they are personally liable for any amount exceeding that.

President Cyril Ramaphosa last year attempted to scrap that stipulation of the handbook.

He quickly withdrew his revised handbook after public outrage over the provision of free water and electricity to ministers at a time when Eskom tariffs were soaring amid debilitating load-shedding.

Ramaphosa has since ordered a review of the ministerial handbook and referred it to the Independent Commission for the Remuneration of Public Office Bearers, which determines the salaries of ministers, MPs and other politicians.

Hard-pressed citizens are due for yet another huge electricity price increase of 18.4% on Friday.

A cabinet minister who asked not to be named confirmed that generators kick in at ministerial homes during load-shedding.

Wayne Duvenage, CEO of the Organisation Undoing Tax Abuse, said he was "not happy at all" that ministers were supplied with generators and inverters while citizens were subjected to darkness.

"One has to ask on what basis does government see fit for ministers to receive such benefits at the cost of the taxpayer. These are luxuries they should pay for themselves. This issue, along with so many others, points to a self-centred government that is not citizen-centric and continues to fail the people of South Africa."

Duvenage said the review process of the ministerial handbook should allow the public to "have a significant say in the extent of perks received [by] ministers".

He slammed the government for slashing the budgets of crucial public entities such as the Electoral

Commission of South Africa (IEC) while prioritising "luxuries for ministers".

"The money can be put to much better use. The Treasury has recently reduced funding to the IEC in a year that leads up to the most important national elections since democracy. This money would be well spent there, to ensure voter turnout is increased, along with improved election integrity.

"When it comes to reining in an errant and egocentric government, the best thing citizens can do is to have the current leaders removed at the next elections, some 15 months away."

No alternative power systems were bought for ministerial homes in Cape Town.

Schreiber said yesterday the government "abuses" the ministerial handbook to "spit in the faces of the people of South Africa".

"While South Africans suffer the devastation of the load-shedding crisis caused by the ANC cabinet, those same ANC ministers and deputy ministers are

abusing the hard-earned taxes of South Africans to insulate themselves from the consequences of their decades-long corruption and mismanagement.

"While the people suffer, the ANC's rock star ministers lounge around the swimming pools of their luxury mansions receiving an uninterrupted supply of power, free water and electricity, and an impenetrable wall of security – all funded on the back of a country where over 30-million people live in desperate poverty and face violent crime on a daily basis," said Schreiber.

"We are currently collecting more information on other abuses perpetrated through the handbook ahead of further action we are considering, abolishing this obscene waste of money once and for all. We undertake to provide complete transparency to the people of South Africa on the extent to which they are abused through the handbook, and to continue leading the fight to end the wastage and corruption that have brought our country to its knees."