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HERITAGE SITE

Social media claims of Robben Island neglect 'malicious'

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THE Department of Sport, Arts and Culture has dismissed recent social media claims about the Robben Island heritage site being in a state of disrepair as "false news being deliberately spread with malicious intent to cause reputational damage".

The department was reacting to a post on a Facebook page of "Citizens of Mzansi" which was widely shared.

Robben Island Museum's (RIM) management said the photographs in the Citizens of Mzansi post that showed certain buildings with the roofs collapsed, were taken after storm damage in 2019 during site inspections with the contractor, to assess the damage and plan for repairs.

RIM posted its own "before and after" pictures to drive its point home.

The offending post claimed the heritage site had been neglected as a result of cadre deployment and blamed the ANC government, urging voters to reject the party in the 2024 elections.

In response to the post, which has since disappeared from the "Citizens of Mzansi" Facebook page, the department posted a video broadcast on Twitter showing tourists visiting Robben Island.

Sports, Arts and Culture Minister Nathi Mthethwa's spokesperson, Masechaba Khumalo, who made the department's response video and did the voice-over, said the claims in the original viral post were "a narrative by ill-intentioned individuals".

"All these photos circulating on social media were taken four years ago during site inspections to assess the damage and plan for the repairs following a devastating storm."

Khumalo said Robben Island was fully operational.

The Ex-Political Prisoners Association (Eppa), which has in the past complained about Robben Island Museum management and the department, said the claims that the heritage site was neglected were motivated by politics.

Eppa secretary-general Mpho Masebola said: "We issue a strong warning that RIM is not a playground for counter-revolutionary elements or political expediency."

Masebola urged South Africans to support RIM's management led by chief executive Abigail Thulare.

Since 2021 Thulare had delivered a turnaround strategy with a renewed integrated conservation management plan, he said, and Eppa supported all her new initiatives for the island.

Speaking for RIM, Thulare said: "We categorically deny any allegations of infrastructure collapse and assure the public the island has been welcoming visitors to its shores."

Thulare admitted that some areas of the site were not for public access, and in dire need of maintenance and that these would be prioritised in line with the available budget.

"Our recovery plans are well under way. Not all stakeholders are necessarily allies, and will seek to undermine the work that many dedicated, committed employees are doing."

During an oversight visit towards the end of 2022, Gillian Bosman (DA), chairperson of the provincial legislature's standing committee on cultural affairs, drew attention to issues affecting RIM caused by national government agencies. Bosman said at the time: "The national Department of Public Works and Infrastructure, meant to maintain infrastructure on the island, does not currently have a permanent contractor appointed to the site, resulting in a lack of maintenance, and instability in operations."

Praising the new management led by chairperson Sathasivan "Saths" Cooper, and Thulare, Bosman said: "The new governing figures have committed to revitalising RIM and building the financial stability and viability of the museum as a tourist attraction."