



Publication: Mercury - Main
Title: Crackdown on 'construction mafia'
Publish date: 02 Apr 2024
Page: 4

Reach: 10610
AVE:R 19366.73
Author: Sipho Jack

MEASURES

Crackdown on 'construction mafia'

SIPHO JACK
sipho.jack@inl.co.za

THE Department of Public Works and Infrastructure is taking measures to stamp out extortion, intimidation and criminality in the construction industry.

The department has established a social intervention unit to facilitate and spread awareness about construction projects in communities before they commence.

This was to ensure that the department curbed and dealt with extortion in the construction industry.

Minister Sihle Zikalala said the unit's priority was to craft a method to allow local communities to participate legally in construction projects in their localities.

"We have also strengthened the rule of law which ensures that people involved in stalling construction projects are dealt with decisively.

"Implementing these strategies has resulted in more construction projects starting up again on sites where construction mafias have long stalled work," Zikalala added.

These construction mafias often disguise themselves as "business forums", which employ violence and use other illegal means of controlling access to public sector procurement

opportunities. These groups typically invade construction sites, demand money or a stake in development projects.

However, the South African Police (SAPS) have made headway in dismantling these groups.

Earlier this year the SAPS confirmed that the 712 cases referred for investigation have resulted in 722 arrests and 52 convictions to date.

This news was welcomed by the Infrastructure Built Anti-Corruption Forum (IBACF).

The IBACF was formed in 2020 and its aim and objectives were to monitor the infrastructure projects and set down systems in place to detect and prevent corruption.

The forum comprises civil society, representatives from the built environment and various arms of government, including the Special Investigating Unit (SIU).

During his State of the Nation Address last year, President Cyril Ramaphosa announced in Parliament that a special unit would be created in the SAPS to deal with the issue that was disrupting businesses.

The construction mafia entails gangs who intimidate foremen, project managers and construction bosses by going on to sites and demanding a stake in projects.

Speaking to Independent Media at the time the South African Forum of Civil Engineering Contractors (Safcec) Western Cape manager Rudolf Murray said their members had been seriously compromised by the activities of the "construction mafia", with severe damage to property, and staff assaulted and even killed.

"We have been in constant engagement with the SAPS and the Office of the Public Prosecutor. Following representations made by Safcec, it was decided by the authorities that site disruptions would henceforth be treated as organised crime," said Murray.

Ekurhuleni businessman, Ntsokolo Nkwale, detailed how a group of thugs terrorised his employees in Tembisa where they were filling up potholes.

According to Nkwale, the "thugs' leader" felt that he had snatched the work from under his nose, claiming the tender was supposed to be his.

"I took the matter to the municipality and we were made to wait for more than six months without a clear explanation, and I eventually told my people to go back to work.

"He later came back with his staff and unfortunately he found me on site. We had a heated conversation and he later threatened me and I had to report him to the police station," he said.

NORIKHOSI TSHABALALA

EXEMPTION CASE