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# 'We must not be intimidated by mafias'

By ZIMASA MATIWANE

● KwaZulu-Natal MEC for public works & infrastructure Martin Meyer is not fazed by reported death threats against him, saying he is steaming ahead with plans to rid the province of the construction mafias that are disrupting building projects.

Meyer told the Sunday Times he would soon be meeting with legitimate players in the construction industry in an attempt to isolate extortionists who have been disrupting government-led projects.

The DA MEC said the threats against him had been exaggerated by the media but declined to discuss them further because a police investigation was under way.

The threats were revealed by national public works minister Dean Macpherson in an interview with TV news channel Newzroom Afrika this week.

"KwaZulu-Natal is a dangerous place and I have had a number of discussions with Meyer and he's now had a number of threats made against him. He told me he found a bullet casing placed by his car. That sort of thing should not be happening," Macpherson told the station.

Meyer said he was happy to hold discussions with "legitimate" business forums.



**KZN MEC for public works and infrastructure Martin Meyer**

"I am happy to talk to them, as long as they come to us on a flag of peace, talk to us within the confines of the law. We are happy to meet and talk to them. It's the ones that want to intimidate us, who show up in double cabs and with AK-47s, that we will not talk to," he said.

His department planned to end the "sabotage" inflicted by construction mafias – extortion groups masquerading as local community representatives that typically demand protection fees from companies car-

rying out work for the government or the private sector.

"It affects both government and the private sector," Meyer said.

"We have been made aware that there are big construction companies that will no longer take contracts in KwaZulu-Natal because of this. There are companies that don't even consider building factories in KwaZulu-Natal because they are scared these guys will come and disrupt. It's leading to a huge loss of investment.

"Menzi High School in Umlazi was supposed to be finished two years ago but we just cannot because whenever we start building the so-called construction mafias come and disrupt work. The community suffers, the department suffers because we have to hire security and it interferes with our ability to deliver services for people," he said.

The R37m project to build 13 classrooms and specialised laboratories in Umlazi, south of Durban, has stalled after the contractor abandoned work several times. Extortionists demanded a 30% cut of the value of the project.

Meyer said that while his department was committed to complying with preferential procurement regulations, which prescribe

that 30% of the value of specified projects should benefit local communities, it was essential that the community representatives were legitimate.

"What we will do is start early and be better in our involvement of the community. We need the community to take ownership of the project and make sure that 30% goes to them because these construction mafia guys, they actually don't benefit the community. Quite often they don't want 30% of the work, they just demand the money."

He said getting the involvement of traditional leadership was also important "because a lot of this work happens in rural areas ... We want a peaceful solution".

"Community inclusion and ownership of the project is important because they want to see these projects go forward," said Meyer.

He said the provincial department planned to liaise with the office of the premier, under which safety and security falls, Macpherson and the minister of police, Senzo Mchunu.

"In a large way this is a law enforcement problem ... hence a high-level engagement must include the minister of police. It is a deeply concerning phenomenon and we can't allow government to be intimidated."