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The South African National Defence Force (SANDF) might be called on to assist government in dealing with the disruption of public infrastructure projects worth billions of rand by the construction mafia, much like it did previously to protect Eskom's power stations and assets.

Minister of Public Works and Infrastructure Dean Macpherson said on Tuesday the construction mafia poses a difficult problem because it creates uncertainty in government's ability to deliver projects on time and on budget – and it is a concern for investors.

"When I went to China and the United Kingdom, it was brought up repeatedly," he said.

Macpherson was speaking at the unveiling – along with acting head of Infrastructure South Africa Mameete Masemola – of a first-of-its-kind project preparation bid window to extensively expand infrastructure investment to accelerate economic growth and create jobs.

He said the department of public works and infrastructure (DPWI) will be hosting a national summit in eThekweni next month, which is "kind of ground zero for this behaviour".

He will attend together with a number of other Cabinet ministers, including the minister of police, the national police commissioner, MECs, and industry players "to contemplate this very difficult problem that exists for infrastructure projects".

Macpherson said the DPWI wants to work more closely with the South African Police Service and he will be meeting with Police Minister Senzo Mchunu soon about how to secure government-led infrastructure projects.

"It's not impossible. It's been done before. You will recall that when Eskom was under attack and sabotaged, the SANDF was deployed to protect those sites and that stopped," he said.

"We have got to do better work in crime intelligence and got to do better work in stopping these [construction site] stoppages."

Macpherson said there is a need for a common approach to deal with the construction mafia.

He said the other issue they must deal with concretely is the 30% so-called set-aside on projects for small and medium black-owned businesses.

"There is now a common position that the 30% so-called set-aside is the gateway for the construction mafia," he said.

Macpherson said small and medium-sized black-owned construction businesses have told him they are "actually the biggest losers because these guys arrive with AK-47s, they arrive to harass people, to inflict violence and so on".