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Take us seriously!

BY KAIZER NENGOVHELA

“Stop undermining us. No Ri Nyadza Ro Neta (you undermined us, we are fed-up),” reads one of the placards carried by protesters who took part in the strike on Monday and Tuesday. This also sums up the frustration of residents living in Sinthumule, Kutama, and Tshikota who feel that the government is simply ignoring their pleas to have access to decent roads and a

reliable supply of water and electricity.

Residents from these areas embarked on a two-day strike that brought the local economy to an almost complete standstill. Demonstrators were ferried to town by buses and minibuses from their area, and on both days, many shops in the area, including Louis Trichardt, were closed, for fear of looting. Protesters blocked major roads such as the D3715, D959, R522, and the N1, as well as entrance roads leading

to areas such as Nzhelele and Tshikota, and the Tshiozwi, Schoemansdal, and Ravele intersection. No buses were operating - only taxis. Subsequently, many local schools were closed over these two days, and workers were unable to report for duty.

Since early on Tuesday morning, taxis were blocking entrances to Louis Trichardt Town at the Elim circle on the N1, where the demonstrators gathered for their march to the Makhado municipal offices.

The march started at 10:00 and went ahead peacefully.

One of the main reasons for the protesters' ire is the poor condition of roads such as the D3715 that links various villages in the Sinthumule and Kutama area. The grievances are also about the poor workmanship on Road D959 (that links Madombidzha with the air force base), as well as the lack of water and the constant power failures.

On Tuesday, a memorandum was presented to the

mayor of Makhado, Dorcus Mboyi, and Cllr Samuel Mnyai, head of technical services in the Vhembe District. The protestors wanted to hand over the memorandum to the MEC for Public Works, Roads, and Infrastructure, Nkakareng Rakgoale, but she failed to avail herself. The memorandum was handed over by the chairperson of the Zoutpansberg Community Development Forum (ZCDF), Mr. Patrick Sikhutshi.

Sikhutshi accused MEC

Rakgoale of being dishonest, saying that when they had met with her on 21 January, she had promised to come and address the residents. He called for her immediate removal and vowed to amplify their grievances until these were addressed. “We want to make a call to the President to ensure that MEC Rakgoale is fired with immediate effect,” he said.

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Traffic came to a standstill when marchers blocked the N1 road during their two-day strike on Monday and Tuesday. The group marched to the Makhado Municipality where a memorandum of grievances was handed over to the mayor. *Photo: Kaizer Nengovhela.*



Two-day protest action

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Sikhutshi said the strike was the result of the government's failure to fulfil its promise to build more secondary roads. He said residents were specifically demanding the completion of phase II of the rehabilitation of the D3715 road from Madodonga. In addition to the deteriorating roads, he said, the shortage of water and the poor electricity supply in their villages were also highlighted as reasons for the strike. Frustrated, he stated that they had had enough of empty promises from the Department of Public Works and Makhado Municipality since 2022.

In the memorandum, residents also demand the immediate scrapping of all debts for Tshikota residents and the normalisation of the water and electricity supply. "We need our people to get services like other villages around the province," he said.

Sikhutshi added that they believed that their demands should be addressed "to avoid rolling [out] a week-long, total shutdown until our demands are taken seriously".

Taxi owner Mr. Khangala Manyuha voiced his frustration with the current situation. "Every time, Public Works officials promise to rehabilitate the road, which is only 8km from Madodonga to Tshikhodobo, but there still has not been any improvement. Taxi and bus owners are tired of

having their precious minibuses drive along this road because their vehicles get worn out in a matter of weeks. It is nearly impossible to drive on this road when it has rained. We need a proper road here," he said.

The local business community was not overly impressed with the disruptive action. One business owner, who did not want his name to be mentioned, summarised the sentiment when he said most local residents could sympathise with the frustrations, but this was not the way to address the problems. "Why act like a bully and punish the workers and the local businesses?" he said. He added that thousands of people could not reach their places of work and would have to put in two days' leave or go without pay.

"Water is the responsibility of the Vhembe District Municipality, which is situated in Thohoyandou. Many of the roads fall under the provincial agency, which is situated in Polokwane. Why take a swipe at the local people, who can do nothing to change the situation?" he asked.

Although many residents believe the protest action is merely the start of the political game-playing that precedes the elections later this year, the organisers were adamant that this was not for grandstanding. No political slogans or regalia were allowed during the protest march.