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ILLEGAL OCCUPATION

# Operation Bring Back to reclaim hijacked properties

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RESIDENTS and housing advocacy groups, Reclaim the City and Ndifuna Ukwazi (RTC/NU) Law Centre, are gearing-up to face off against the Department Public Works and Infrastructure (DPWI) in the Western Cape High Court tomorrow.

It comes as DPWI Deputy Minister Sihle Zikalala on Friday embarked on a mission to claim back stolen/hijacked properties in Goodwood and Khayelitsha under the campaign, Operation Bring Back. It was part of the nationwide campaign, which Zikalala is leading across the country.

According to the DPWI, in the Western Cape alone, over 40 state-owned properties are believed to be illegally occupied, hijacked, or stolen.

According to RTC/NU, the DPWI will urgently seek to evict residents from Reclaim the City's Irene Grootboom House.

The property was previously known as 104 Darling Street and was once a residential property.

The residents of the property have allegedly had numerous engagements with the DPWI, "with less assistance from Public Works".

According to RTC/NU, in 2018, the property was adopted as one of Reclaim the City's inner-city occupations.

Despite the group's efforts to raise funds and repair damaged areas, the occupation's conditions have not improved since then.

The Ndifuna Ukwazi Law Centre, representing the respondents, will argue that the application, which was launched shortly after a tender process for the property closed, is an abuse of court processes based on a "self-created urgency" and should be dismissed.

Ruth Stein, attorney at Ndifuna Ukwazi, said: "They allowed this building to decay for over a decade, tacitly permitting occupation. Now, after a tender for private office space has closed, they demand that the court issue an urgent eviction, citing safety concerns, with no regard to the alternative accommodation of the families living there. This is not about safety; it is about clearing the property for a commercial award."

RTC/NU said the DPWI has failed to provide any feasible alternative emergency accommodation that meets the residents' needs.

The group is expected to argue that the DPWI's application, marked by a failure to engage, a neglect of its own property, and a disregard for providing lawful alternatives, constitutes a self-created emergency designed to expedite a commercial process at the expense of vulnerable residents.

On Friday morning, Zikalala visited a property which was originally owned by an elderly woman who, in her will, directed that it be transferred to the SAPS to support the fight against drugs.

The DPWI said the property was occupied by the SAPS for some time before being vacated. It was later leased privately for commercial use, but once the lease ended, it was abandoned and left vulnerable to illegal occupation.

Further enquiries to the DPWI were unanswered by the time of publication.