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Zikalala

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Page: 4



ASSERTIVE: Public works and infrastructure deputy minister Sihle Zikalala addresses delegates at the first international conference on Sustainable Construction and the Built Environment organised by Walter Sisulu University in East London on Tuesday. Picture: ZIYANDA ZWENI

Public works determined to reclaim hijacked buildings — Zikalala

Focus on illegally occupied state properties, especially in Mthatha, he says

**ENTLE MBONYANA and
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The Eastern Cape is plagued by hijacked and derelict buildings, but public works and infrastructure deputy minister Sihle Zikalala says efforts to reclaim the buildings continue.

Hundreds of empty properties, including government buildings and factories, have been hijacked by criminals, with state entities such as the Eastern Cape Development Corporation unable to use about 300 of its properties.

The corporation said in April it was losing about R2.4bn a year as a result of the loss of about R2m in monthly rent from its illegally occupied properties.

According to municipal records, the corporation owns about 625 commercial, industrial and residential buildings in Mthatha.

The national department of public works has 45 properties and provincial public works 574.

Speaking on the sidelines of the first international conference on Sustainable Construction and the Built Environment,

Zikalala said efforts were being made to reclaim illegally occupied government properties, particularly in Mthatha.

"We are evicting those who illegally occupy state buildings through Operation Bring Back our properties."

"Where homes have been illegally built on public land, we have to negotiate and ensure they pay compensation to the state, and then we see to it that they are also regulated."

"The state's assets belong to the state ... We are going to remove all of them [illegal occupants]. We have started in Mthatha ... but the work is continuing throughout the country."

Referring to projects that were incomplete or had been hijacked, Zikalala said it was important that the engineering profession was regulated.

Learning from building collapses in the Western Cape and George in the Western Cape and Ngqobo which had resulted in loss of life, he said it was important that regulations were enforced within the private sector too.

"We are advocating for the establishment of an Office of the Engineer-General SA, which will set standards across the public and private sectors."

Zikalala said communities needed to be integrated in pro-

ject development and law enforcement to combat construction hijackings.

"Communities must benefit from projects legally. But we also need strong law enforcement. People cannot just hijack construction sites."

"If funds are allocated for a project, the results must reflect the investment. The number of houses built must match what was promised."

Zikalala raised concern over unregulated engineers and construction mafias, referencing incidents in Ballito (KwaZulu-Natal) and George.

Asked about construction projects left incomplete, Zikalala deferred some responsibility to the department of human settlements but emphasised the importance of value for money.

The conference, hosted by Walter Sisulu University in partnership with the Council for the Built Environment, focused on challenges including climate change, unregulated engineering practices and sustainable development in SA's construction sector.

Zikalala emphasised the need for climate-adaptive construction, especially in flood-prone provinces such as the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal.

"Floods affect humanity, but infrastructure is also devastat-

ed, so it is important we build back better in a way that is resilient and that will also embrace adaptation."

He stressed the role of research and academia, noting the importance of collaboration with WSU to ensure infrastructure development reflected current environmental and social realities.

WSU's deputy vice-chancellor of research and innovation, Prof Nosisi Feza, said the conference meant much more in the light of the global community sustainability agenda, with construction and the built environment core in "designing everything that ensures we are protected and are able to attend to the disasters we have, especially in SA, especially among the poorest people, the housing, the roads and all of that".

"So we do need to meet together here so that our students, as well as our research, is more relevant."

Feza expressed concern over the retirement of senior academics, saying: "We must build our teams through postgraduate programmes to produce home-grown experts."

Feza said WSU was committed to using academic knowledge to uplift underdeveloped regions like the Eastern Cape through partnerships with the government and industry.