



No negotiation with the building mafia, says minister

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No negotiation with the building mafia, says minister

By LUYOLO MKENTANE Political Correspondent

Public works & infrastructure minister Dean Macpherson has welcomed the cabinet's approval of the Integrated social facilitation framework, a national policy instrument aimed at preventing construction project disruptions by the so-called construction mafia before they occur.

The construction mafia came under the spotlight several years ago after disrupting multibillion rand infrastructure projects around the country. Describing themselves as "business forums", they demanded a 30% share of project values, often using intimidation, extortion and, in some cases, violence to enforce their demands.

Macpherson said that where criminals invade sites, threaten workers, demand money, manipulate procurement, vandalise infrastructure or stop projects, they must be arrested.

"There can be no negotiation with extortionists. There can be no compromise with criminals," he said.

Business Day has reported that for the past five years, the construction mafia cost the South African economy R63bn, with more than 180 key government projects disrupted, halted and delayed around the country since 2019.

This as the government has committed R1 trillion in public investment over three years to build and maintain infrastructure. President Cyril Ramaphosa said in his state of the nation address in February that this was the largest allocation of its sort in the country's history.

In a media briefing in Cape Town yesterday, Macpherson said progress has been achieved since the signing of the Durban declaration, with more than 770 reported cases, 241 arrests, 176 convictions, and construction disruptions in KwaZulu-Natal reduced from more than 60 per month to fewer than 10.

The government was moving from reacting to construction mafia disruptions to preventing them through co-ordinated law enforcement responses, contractor blacklisting, professional social facilitators, stronger monitoring, and clearer channels for lawful community participation.

"When I entered office in July 2024, one of the first and clearest threats facing public infrastructure delivery was the construction mafia. It was clear to me then, as it remains clear to me now, that South Africa cannot turn itself into a construction site if construction sites are controlled by criminals."

Implementation of the integrated social facilitation framework will be co-ordinated through the department of public works & infrastructure-led integrated social facilitation collaboration committee, he said.

The committee includes, among others, the department of public works & infrastructure, the infrastructure technical assistance facility, the Council for the Built Environment, the Construction Industry Development Board, the Independent Development Trust, the Association of Construction Project Managers, the Association of Social Engagement Facilitators of South Africa, the National Treasury and the SA Local Government Association.

Five practical areas

"This is important because the construction mafia does not operate in one sphere of government, and infrastructure delivery does not sit in one department alone. A national problem requires a national framework. Going forward, we will focus on five practical areas," Macpherson said.

The five areas include prioritising implementation on high-risk projects where community conflict, extortion, vandalism or disruption risks are greatest and working with public entities, provinces, and municipalities and implementing agents to ensure that social facilitation is built into project planning and procurement from the start, he said.

"Third, we will work with the South African Council for the Project and Construction Managers Professions and the Council for the Built Environment to advance the professionalisation, accreditation and registration of social facilitators.

"Fourth, we will strengthen monitoring and reporting so that we can measure whether professional social facilitation is reducing disruptions, improving community satisfaction and protecting project delivery.

"Fifth, we will continue working with SAPS, the National Treasury, the Construction Industry Development Board, provinces, municipalities and the construction sector to ensure that those who commit extortion, intimidation, violence and procurement abuse face consequences."

Macpherson said implementation guidelines for the integrated social facilitation framework "are being developed, awareness webinars are being conducted across the sector, and the South African Council for the Project and Construction Managers Professions is advancing the professional registration category for social facilitators".

The integrated social facilitation framework does not replace law enforcement, he said. "It strengthens it. Where there are legitimate community concerns, we must engage.

"Where local businesses seek lawful participation, we must create transparent pathways. Where young people want skills and work opportunities, we must link infrastructure projects to real development," he said.

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