

Crooked officials plunder state land

De Lille cracks whip on dodgy practices at public works

By GRAEME HOSKEN and MPUMZI ZUZILE

● Crime syndicates working with corrupt department of public works & infrastructure officials are fleeing the government of millions of rands through the "nijacking" and illegal rental and sale of state-owned buildings and land.

The syndicates are taking advantage of a shamolic system that is supposed to record and manage all of the government's 81,575 buildings and 30,495 pieces of land, which it estimates are worth a combined R127,7bn.

The register of immovable assets is in such chaos that the state does not know how much its properties are worth, where exactly they are, who occupies them, whether they are empty, or even whether they have been stolen.

Shocked by what she learnt when she took over a department that has become a byword for corruption, public works minister Patricia de Lille ordered a massive overhaul of the register and action against corrupt officials behind the illegal leases and sales.

"The minister is demanding answers as to what the hell is going on," a senior official told the Sunday Times.

De Lille's move comes ahead of a report that auditor-general Kimi Makwetu is set to table in parliament in November which includes findings on the register and the department's Property Management Trading Entity.

Issues flagged in Makwetu's report will be contained in the department's annual report,

due to be tabled in parliament this week. In an interview with the Sunday Times, De Lille confirmed there were massive problems with the register.

"We are the custodians of 30,495 pieces of land and 81,575 buildings, yet little is known about these, including their values and status. The auditor-general has raised issues about this register, especially around the correct classification of the assets. He is perturbed by the lack of property values and correct addresses. I told department officials three months ago our information is unreliable and that this must be urgently addressed."

The Sunday Times has independently uncovered instances in which current and former public works officials across SA have allegedly illegally rented out or sold properties belonging to the state.

They include:

● A former clerk in the department's Johannesburg office, Bhekisizwe Ngcobo, who was found guilty of fraud last week for renting out seven state-owned houses and flats in Johannesburg's inner city, Roodepoort and Carletonville. Ngcobo pocketed the R70,000

in rent he charged his tenants;

● Thando Sentile from the Eastern Cape, who admitted this week to accepting payments of R20,000 each from two local people as down payments on state-owned double-storey houses in King William's Town. Sentile begged the Sunday Times not to publish the story and vowed he would refund the money next week (see sidebar); and

● An official in KwaZulu-Natal who the department declined to name because he is facing disciplinary action for selling state land in Durban's posh suburb of Glenashley.

De Lille's spokesperson, Leigh-Anne Jansen, said another case being investigated is the sale of state land next door to the department's own Durban regional office.



Patricia de Lille