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Hawks spokesperson Capt Simphiwe Mhlongo confirmed a case of fraud was being investigated by the Hawks' Serious Commercial Crime unit, but said no arrests have yet been made.

Ngcobo, who resigned from the department before his disciplinary hearing could begin, will appear in the Johannesburg magistrate's court tomorrow for sentencing.

Hillbrow police spokesperson Sgt Mduduzi Zondo said Ngcobo convinced his tenants to renovate the properties before moving into them and paying him rent.

"He began this scam in February last year. All the houses and flats were neglected. His victims paid him the money with the idea that they would occupy the properties once they had renovated them," said Zondo.

De Lille said the properties mainly at risk of illegal occupation were those that were unregistered and not surveyed.

"A functioning electronic asset register will ensure greater accountability and help stop corruption, which is a tough fight. We are working closely with the auditor-general to ensure the proper monitoring and evaluation of all state properties," she said.

Senior department officials told the Sunday Times that the illegal leasing and sale of state property was fuelled by there being open access to the register.

One said the police's Special Investigating Unit and the department's anti-corruption unit were investigating 2,162 "questionable" building leases.

"One knows there is a piece of land in a

Crooked officials plunder state land

particular place owned by the state. Other than that you know nothing about the property. There is a huge problem of misclassification. You find properties listed as vacant when in fact there are buildings and houses on them. You have properties, including vast tracts of land, whose values and status are completely unknown," the official said.

"Criminal syndicates, who work with corrupt officials, capitalise on this lack of knowledge.

"Corrupt officials, who access the unsecured register, work with criminals to identify neglected, forgotten or vacant properties. They transfer these to third parties and then sell or lease them, earning themselves millions of rands.

"We are not just talking about one property, but hundreds. Houses, flats, office blocks and land are being hijacked and stolen without government's knowledge."

The official said that though the department had made strides in developing an asset register, there were major problems that "fuel the risk of crime syndicates hijacking government properties".

Another senior department official said improvements had been made to the register, but there are still serious challenges.

"Audits of the register only began two years ago. For years there has been no verified knowledge on what properties were owned, where they were, whether they were vacant or dilapidated, or their value," the official said.

"With audits now carried out, things are improving, but given that the state owns so many buildings and land, it's a huge task."

The Sunday Times has seen the department's action plan drawn up in response to Makwetu's findings reflecting "recurring problems" about the misclassification of properties, that the properties on the register don't match the properties the auditors inspected, and that the sizes of many properties have not been accurately recorded.

Jansen said public works had begun a project to establish how widespread the practice of letting out or selling off of state-owned properties is.

The DA's public works spokesperson, Patricia Kopane, described the register and the department's Property Management Trading Entity as a "disaster".

"Property assets should earn the country revenue, yet we have a situation where the illegal renting and sale of state-owned land is rife," she said.