

'Strong Evidence Of Arson' In Cape Fires

Written by Rudi Prinsloo

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There was strong evidence of arson in the fires that have ravaged the Helderberg in past weeks, Cape Town mayor Helen Zille said on Friday.

The city would lay a complaint of arson with the police, and help in a forensic investigation to ascertain the cause of the devastating fires.

There had been "a suggestion" that fire reservists, who were paid per fire they fought, had a motive to start blazes, because it gave them work.

"We will leave no stone unturned to find out what and who is causing these fires that are so devastating to the environment and people's livelihoods," Zille said in a statement.

She said an incendiary device, made of a cigarette with about 100 matches attached by a rubber band, was discovered next to dry brush in a nature reserve outside Somerset West. It had failed to ignite.

"These devices are typically used by arsonists, because they can make their get-away in the time it takes the cigarette to burn down, ignite the matches and light the vegetation," she said.

Plastic bottles with candles in them had also been found.

In addition, the fire patterns were not those of natural fires. Firefighters had reported four plumes of smoke rising simultaneously, suggesting that the fires originated in four different places.

This did not happen in the case of natural fires (which were extremely rare) or accidental fires, which typically originated in one spot.

Zille said there had been a "huge" increase in the number of fire-related incidents. In January and February this year, 4202 fire-related incidents were reported compared with 3092 in the same period last year.

"Part of this increase may be attributed to arson," she said.

She said it was not clear why people committed such "heinous acts".

"It could be that they have psychological problems and get a kick out of seeing the destruction of nature and livelihoods.

"There is also a suggestion that fire reservists, who are paid per fire, have an incentive to start fires as it provides them with a work opportunity..."

"Whatever the cause, the people responsible must be caught and punished."

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