

Government Probes Causes Of Protests

Written by Rudi Prinsloo
Sunday, 26 July 2009 04:56 -



As violent service delivery protests continued to rock parts of South Africa on Thursday, the government released the first findings of a probe into such action.

"[A] lack of responsiveness to issues raised by communities," was one of the findings in a preliminary report into the cause of recent protests in Mpumalanga, which was released on Thursday.

Co-operative Governance and Traditional Affairs Minister Sicelo Shiceka sent a task team to compile the report on the province last week, which had seen violent and xenophobic protests.

Tensions between the political and administrative sections of some municipalities were also revealed in the preliminary report, as were financial mismanagement and allegations of fraud and corruption.

Some ward committees were not fully functional and therefore not communicating properly with communities.

Infrastructure was also often poorly planned, maintained and managed.

There were problems with some municipalities' integrated development plans and budgeting processes.

Over the last month disgruntled residents had taken to the streets in no fewer than 20 towns.

Angry crowds had burnt tyres, hurled stones at the police and passers-by and recently turned on foreigners.

In many cases, law enforcement officials had to use gas and rubber bullets to quell violence in areas such as Diepsloot, Piet Retief, Rustenburg, Meyerton, Zeerust, Milnerton and Khayelitsha.

On Thursday about 30 foreigners in Balfour in Mpumalanga sought refuge at a police station, fearing for their lives.

Captain Leonard Hlathi said residents in the Siyathemba township had gone on a "rampage", throwing stones at foreigners.

Shops were looted and tyres were burnt.

On Wednesday, people also tried to burn down the mayor's house, as well that of his parents.

Twenty-one people were arrested for public violence in the predominantly agricultural

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community, about 70km east of Johannesburg.

A full assessment of the state of municipalities and an audit of service delivery in Mpumulanga would begin next week.

Shiceka condemned the violent and xenophobic turn the protests had taken.

"Such acts... take away from any genuine grievances that anyone may be presenting to government," he said in a statement, adding that xenophobic attacks were "act[s] of criminality" unacceptable in a country preparing to host "the entire world" during the 2010 Soccer World Cup.

Meanwhile the Gauteng provincial government said "criminal elements" were "hijacking" community concerns over service delivery.

"Poor communication with communities and the hijacking of community concerns by criminal elements were some of the factors fuelling these protests," the provincial government said after a meeting of its executive council this week.

While protests in Gauteng had been limited to "a few isolated areas," the executive said "anarchy" would not be allowed to take root.

The African National Congress said while it had a "deep understanding" of the impact poor service delivery had on South Africans, "all criminal acts" were condemned.

Party spokeswoman Jessie Duarte said the government had put plans in place to address the issues.

Meanwhile the ANC Youth League said brushing the protests aside as unfounded would not help.

"Dismissing the [protests] as products of a third force will never assist the people's challenges and will not help expose the [ulterior] motives if there are any," it said in a statement.

In KwaZulu-Natal, ninety people arrested for looting shops in Durban were released on a warning by the Durban Magistrate's Court on Thursday.

The SA Unemployed People's Movement members would appear in court again next month of charge of theft, stemming from a looting spree at Shoprite Checkers and Pick n Pay outlets on Wednesday.

Ethekwini municipality mayor Obed Mlaba and ANC secretary in KwaZulu-Natal Sihle Zikalala condemned the looting.

"Notwithstanding the constitutional right of people to strike and the plight faced by the unemployed, the looting of shops cannot be justified," Mlaba said.

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However Unemployed People's Movement spokeswoman Nozipho Mteshane said storming shops was a last-ditch attempt to ask for help after pleas for grants for the jobless went unanswered.

"We were not stealing. We were just demonstrating. Taking food from the shops was a way of showing government that unemployed people are hungry."

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