

Calls for action against housing department

ZOHRA MOHAMED TEKE
and SIMONE SAMUELS

KWAZULU-Natal's housing department is facing calls for criminal charges against it after the deaths of two children in a fire at its West Point Lodge on Durban's embankment.

It also faces appeals for the immediate closure of the "unsafe" 12-storey building in Margaret Mcaidi Avenue (Victoria Embankment).

And residents said it was sad that two children had to die before the provincial government got involved in their long-running saga.

Tenant rights group, the Organisation of Civic Rights (OCR), raised the need for criminal charges against the Department of Human Settlements.

But Human Settlements MEC, Ravi Pillay, described the suggestion as "absolutely ridiculous", saying there was no basis for criminal charges to be brought against the department over Friday's fire.

The pair, aged one-and-a-half and three, were said to have been locked in the second floor flat by their mother who went out on errands.

OCR chairman, Dr Iqbal Mohamed, said the department had for

eight years ignored properties it owned, and had allowed them to become unfit for human occupation.

"We are to hold a meeting with the current MEC this week, who is proactive and regarded as someone who does not wish to see tenants being displaced. But we want the building to be closed down immediately as it poses a safety and health risk to tenants in the current state.

"The department needs to rehouse those tenants pending the process over the building's future," Mohamed said.

Steps

Pillay said in response he would meet tenants tomorrow to discuss a way forward, including immediate steps that needed to be taken.

"We are engaging in good faith and will consider our options. This issue of inner city poverty is a national concern and one that I will be raising at that level later this month.

"While we seem to be addressing rural poverty, we are not developing an effective policy framework on the inner city poor, and although this is not an easy solution, we will engage with stakeholders to unpack this with the financial constraints that we face," Pillay added.

Approached for comment,

eThekwini's head of planning, Soobs Moonsammy, also called for the building to be closed down immediately, saying it was among the city's "bad buildings" and not safe for occupation.

The West Point Lodge was among 22 properties purchased by the department in a buying spree of more than R30m in 2003, under irregular circumstances, which saw a department official jailed.

The properties, with the exception of West Point Lodge, are still being managed by their previous owners without the department reclaiming them for the intended purpose of social housing.

The department took control of the West Point Lodge last year, dismissing the previous owners, Rikesh Maharaj and his brother, Anesh, who managed the property. The department said at the time that it would follow the same process with all of its other properties - which did not happen.

However since the department's control of West Point Lodge, tenants who have allegedly not been paying for services, have had their water and electricity cut and the building has degenerated into disrepair.

After Friday's fire, one of

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the tenants who asked not to be named, also admitted they were tampering with electricity connections to get it illegally.

Anesh Maharaj said "this incident with the two children could have been averted. Somebody needs to explain the absence of fire extinguishers and management safety rules applicable to high-rise buildings like West Point.

"The former MEC refused to discuss the cancellation of the sale of the property which we were willing to engage in and we can only hope the current MEC has a better head on his shoulders on the matter.

"However, in my personal capacity, I feel the department needs to explain how, as a ministry that purports to serve housing for the needy, (it can allow) people to reside in a property of some 12 storeys, with children, minus any management

safety features.

"If a similar situation arose with a private individual, he or she would have been criminally charged over the matter," Maharaj said.

Thulani Nyawo, a resident at West Point, said water had been cut off for the past two-and-a-half months, making it impossible to put out the fire.

Nyawo said in despite of concerns that the erratic supply of water and electricity was a threat to their safety, many occupants continued to live in the building because they had no alternative.

He said since the fire his family of three, along with many others, had re-occupied the building despite the poor conditions, including no working lifts, a pervading stench of urine and an abundance of flies and mosquitoes.

"There is still smoke and ash in the building, which is not healthy especially for children, but we have nowhere else to go," he said.

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