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THREATS TO BURN HOUSES

Bonela residents in land grabs fight

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RESIDENTS of Bonela are at their wits' end over "land invaders" building shacks as part of an expanding informal settlement.

However, the shack dwellers deny they are invading land and said they had an agreement in place with the Department of Human Settlements.

A resident, who asked not to be named, said he was threatened when he tried to stop a shack going up in his backyard at the weekend.

"They blew whistles and other people came. As I was talking to them, the guy just continued building. He's so close that when I put up a fence, that shack will be inside because it's on my property," he said.

He recorded some of the confrontation, and one of the voices can be heard threatening to burn his house "again".

"I'm not safe, they petrol-bombed my house before, and this was after numerous break-ins. I can't sell because no one wants to buy here, they don't even want to rent. Eventually I have to abandon my house for the safety of my family."

He said his neighbours had abandoned their home due to safety concerns and the house had been standing empty for more than a year.

But Thapelo Mohapi, general secretary of shack dwellers movement Abahlali base-Mjondolo, denied that the settlement was expanding.

He said a court interdict had allowed for 35 houses to be built on Department of Human Settlements land, but an agreement had been reached with the department for 229 shacks.

Asked about the shiny new corrugated iron shack which came up on Saturday night and two pieces of land that have been ready for building on either side, Mohapi said these were not new.

"These are people rebuilding proper structures after

their houses were demolished. "There are also plots but these are all within the 229 – not everyone had the money to build then, so they are building when they can afford it, but they are not new."

Mohapi said that as part of the agreement earlier this year, Abahlali would monitor and ensure the number does not escalate. "Each door has a number; you will not see any door there without a number."

eThekweni deputy mayor Fawzia Peer said that since the agreement was signed, the city's anti-land invasion unit had stepped back and was no longer demolishing shacks in the area.

"What we are concerned with now is looking at the infrastructure to possibly provide water and sanitation, as we can't leave families without bare necessities."

Mohapi declared the area a victory for Abahlali, hailing it as "real expropriation without compensation".

Outcome

But Human Settlements MEC Ravi Pillay said the agreement was a draft and part of a court process that would dictate the final outcome.

"The security guards can't be all over, it's a wide area. Occupation is a constant challenge and we handle it on a day-by-day basis. This is not a permanent solution, as that land is zoned public open space."

Ward councillor Warren Burne said Human Settlements should not have agreed to the erection of 229 shacks.

"That area is D'Moss (Durban Metropolitan Open Space System). It's one of the areas demarcated as a green lung area for the health of the city. This is flagrantly disregarding the rights and interests of the people of Bonela," he said.

While he sympathised with those needing homes, by entering into an agreement with Abahlali, the department was encouraging land invasions.