

Vastrap residents demand houses, roads, toilets and electricity

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Despite tensions, black and coloured residents protest together

By Joseph Chirume



Residents of Vastrap informal settlement in Port Elizabeth have been protesting since last week. Photo supplied by Khaya Makalima

Vastrap informal settlement in Booyens Park, Port Elizabeth, remains tense following a week-long standoff between residents and police.

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Hundreds of protesters blockaded roads with burning tyres on Thursday. No arrests were made.

The group has been protesting since last week Thursday. They are demanding better services and that the municipality build them houses. Some residents, mostly black, want to be relocated saying their settlement has been run over by criminals. While coloured residents, who are in the majority in the settlement, are demanding that homes be built for them on the land.

Despite racial tensions in the community, black and coloured residents have protested together. They have demanded to be addressed by the Nelson Mandela Bay mayoral committee member responsible for Human Settlements, Councillor Nqaba Bhanga.

The residents say their shacks are overcrowded and services like water and toilets are overstretched. There is no legal electricity at Vastrap. Illegal connections from Eskom power boxes are used, but these are often switched off by the municipality.

Community leader Khaya Makalima said several meetings were held with municipal officials who promised to relocate them. "The municipality told us to wait until a relocation site has been identified," he said

Makalima said the area was riddled with crime and gangsterism. "Our property is being stolen in broad daylight. Our children are not even free to go to school unaccompanied. We are also afraid to visit the toilets at night," he said.

Makalima lives in a two-room shack with his wife and four children. They moved to Vastrap from Walmer township in 2009. He said only a few people who were on the housing waiting list were moved to RDP houses.

"We have witnessed several horrible murders and rape cases here. We want to be relocated to a safer place," he said.

Ntombekhaya Ngesi shares a one-room shack with her husband and their five children. Ngesi said the municipality took long to clear the already limited number of toilets in the settlement. She said the narrow gaps between shacks made it impossible for emergency vehicles to access the area.

"Police have on several occasions failed to get in and arrest suspects," she said. Ngesi said the settlement was also littered with rubbish.

Everson Malgas said he refused to move from the land and wanted houses to be built for them. "I am participating in the protest to demand better services from the municipality. The officials should also build roads, toilets and give us electricity. I will not move from this place because it's a coloured area," he said.

Councillor Bhanga urged residents to adhere to municipality's housing list. He said Vastrap is an unlawfully occupied area. "These are some of the effects of illegal occupation of municipal land," he said.

"The place is overcrowded and there are no roads for emergency vehicles and the police to help people. The people of Vastrap should follow the normal channels to apply for houses. When land is available, we will then move them," he said.

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