

Sexwale urged to withdraw comments about "cut-off date" for free housing

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The Abahlali baseMjondolo (Those Who Live in Shacks) organisation, which fights for the rights of shack dwellers, said Sexwale's statement last week was a recipe for "uncontrolled protests".

Sexwale told an international conference in Cape Town that the government was discussing an end to free housing.

"There has got to be a cut-off date. We are discussing that. You can't cut off the poor right now, particularly in the current national economic environment. But we can't sustain what we are doing for a long time," Sexwale said.

Abahlali baseMjondolo's Western Cape chairman, Mzonke Poni, who yesterday completed a three-day fast in protest against South Africa's housing shortage, said the government should have held public hearings before discussing an end to free housing.

"If they open this for public comment the government will see it has no support at all," said Poni.

"The state is already failing to build houses for the poor and now they want to have a cut-off date.

"When people occupy unused pieces of land, they unleash the police against us.

"We cannot accept an announcement that will see people move from bad to worse," he said.

COPE MP Phumelele Ntshiqela, who claimed to represent 17000 members of an organisation called National Informal Settlements of SA, said he had been flooded with complaints since Sexwale made his comments.

"Sexwale must withdraw his statement. People are fuming over this. If the government cannot build houses or deliver services, then what do we have the government for? Housing people is sustainable because it creates jobs and restores dignity.

"We are going to fight this decision and [a cut-off date] is not going to happen."

Richard Pithouse, a political science lecturer at Rhodes University, Grahamstown, backed the organisations and said the government had to continue providing housing until everyone was housed.

"If Sexwale thinks providing decent housing is negotiable he is completely out of touch with the political realities," said Pithouse.

"There is no realistic vision for poor people to attain a dignified life in his world view, and we have no choice but to consider his attitudes a clear and present danger to the integrity of our society."