

Shacks outside luxury estate burned down

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Good enough to build and clean the "madam's" multimillion rand home, but too poor to live outside the walls of a luxury Pretoria security estate, a Malawian family watched as Tshwane Metro Police torched their shack along with dozens of others.

The mom begged not to be identified for fear of being fired and losing the measly R50-a-week salary she is paid to clean her employer's multimillion Woodhill Estate home.

The woman - a mother of three children, including a seven-month-old infant - described how she and her young family were getting ready to sleep on the streets.

"It is freezing. I don't know what to do. I am scared my children will die," she said.

Their crime: They, along with 400 other people, are an eyesore and destroy the property value of the residents living in five luxury housing estates around their little community of migrant workers and illegal immigrants, known as "Cemetery Estate".

The "estate" is on council land between the Pretoria East Cemetery and Woodlands Boulevard shopping centre.

Close by, are the multimillion rand Woodhill, Mooikloof, MeadowGlen, MeadowRidge and Hillside security estates.

Accused of being illegal immigrants and of being behind the area's apparently skyrocketing crime rate, many "Cemetery Estate" residents worked as cleaners in the luxury homes on the posh estates.

That was until Wednesday when metro police, on the orders of lawyers representing those living in the estates, burnt down their shacks and ordered them to leave the Pretoria East area.

Using a court order from 2008 to control the occupation of council land along Garstfontein Road, the estates' lawyers on Wednesday demanded that police destroy the 50 or so shacks in "Cemetery Estate".

Within less than 24 hours of an "eviction notice" being served on "Cemetery Estate" residents, heavily armed metro police, guarded by the Garsfontein SAPS, oversaw the shacks' destruction - torn down with spades and crowbars.

Plastic sheeting, cardboard partitions and wooden planks were dragged into piles and torched.

While city and law enforcement authorities have accused those living in "Cemetery Estate" of being illegal immigrants and criminals, no one was arrested or held for deportation.

A "slip-up" saw metro police failing to notify Home Affairs officers about illegal immigrants living in the area, or alerting the council's housing and social services departments about the need for alternative accommodation.

Asked why no one was arrested, police said they didn't have time to check fingerprints.

The Malawian mother, a qualified teacher whose husband was paid R600 a month to build her 'madam's' multimillion rand house, said: "We can work inside the estates, but can't live next door.

"Council does this because we are poor and our 'madams' are rich; because we have plastic roofs and paraffin stoves and they have tiles and electricity," she said.

Mariza Oelofse, representing residents from the luxury estates, said: "We were approached by our clients to have these squatters removed. We went to the council and requested they adhere to the court order and remove these people, which is what they did.

"We are satisfied with the way the city responded."

Oelofse said the land could not be occupied because it was agricultural land and a nature conservancy. "Highly endangered plant and animal species have been decimated because these people have eaten them and polluted the Moreleta Spruit with human waste.

"There are strict regulations regarding land occupation. Our clients have expensive rates and people can't just stay here."

Asked where the people should stay, Oelofse said: "It is not our concern."

Metro police spokeswoman Alta Fourie said the informal residents posed a "serious" problem, especially regarding crime.

"Housebreakings, breaking into cars, rape, and smash-and-grab attacks have increased, mostly because of these illegal immigrants," she said.

Asked for the crime statistics and why no one was arrested, Fourie referred the Pretoria News to the SAPS whose spokeswoman, Aveline Hardaker, referred the newspaper back to Fourie.

Fourie said residents were given 24 hours to move. "We told them we would destroy their shacks if they didn't move, which is what happened. It is now their responsibility to relocate and find their own accommodation," she said.

Attorney Louise du Plessis, representing "Cemetery Estate" residents, said the court order was not against her clients.

"There is no court order on that property. The existing court order says the municipality must bring an application to have the people evicted, which it has not done. This order is not an eviction notice and the council's actions are criminal.

"Evictions can't happen by torching people's property. This is a declaration of war by the city on civil society and homeless people and we will now see them in court," she said.

Mark Napier, of Urban Landmark, said regardless of whether there was a court order or not, the city had to find alternative accommodation for evicted people.

He said: "Virtually all cities' policy statements, including Tshwane, talk of integration of poorer people into the city. But, as soon as a real opportunity arises, the city listens to the wealthier residents and evicts the poorer residents."

Asked to comment, council spokeswoman Dikeledi Phiri, said: "I can't respond... due to the unavailability of key officials in the housing department."

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