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POWERFUL, CONNECTED LANDLORDS SET THE AGENDA

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Eleven years ago the Organisation of Civic Rights (OCR) argued the case for recognition of rental dwellings as a necessary option. It was a period in our history when opinions were high and ambitious plans were introduced to provide housing for all.

OCR managed to get statistics from Stats SA that strengthened its arguments for tenants' rights. About 8.6 million people lived in rented accommodation then and most households were vulnerable to arbitrary evictions and exorbitant rent hikes.

The homeless community was steadily expanding in the inner cities, while the informal settlements seemed to be the norm in certain formal residential neighbourhoods.

A day after human rights day and on the eve of the KwaZulu Natal housing conference, tenants are still at the mercy of certain landlords. This new assemblage of landlords has political connection.

They donate generously to political organisations- seemingly without any ulterior motives. Their smiling faces of generosity appear at most functions, unknown to political parties that this small new group of landlords exploit their tenants, and are involved in arbitrary evictions particularly of single parents and children.

In the past two years they have displaced and uprooted families in and around the city and at least two high profile individuals are involved, one indirectly in "sweat shops" in the inner city.

Tomorrow's housing conference must look at the plight of tenants and Durban's growing homeless community. It must find a way forward to provide further protection to tenants whose rented dwellings are converted for student accommodation or for commercial use; - either sold or rented out to provincial and national government structures.

It has to evaluate the number of high rise buildings recently changed hands or shut down by the city authorities but placed back into the "market", thereby skewing rentals and prices excessively high.

The irony is that the housing conference, unknown to the honourable Minister and the department of housing is to be held on the premises of one such owner and agent.

Tenants who are facing evictions and who were threatened with the disconnection of services by this landlord would be watching the conference with keen interest.