

City targets property owners who do not maintain buildings

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UNSCRUPULOUS building owners face the prospect of being fined more than seven times the normal property rates levied on their buildings if they do not keep them in good condition.

This is according to Hoosen Moolla, head of the Inner City eThekweni Regeneration and Urban Management Programme (iTrump), which addresses problems that affect the city.

Moolla made the remarks yesterday after a team conducted raids across Durban's central business district and the Point area last week. The raids are part of the city's efforts to clean up areas which have become a problem.

The team conducting the raids comprised SAPS and metro police officers, and Home Affairs officials. They found that there were a number of non-compliant buildings whose infractions ranged from being fire hazards to not having proper water infrastructure.

One of the team's successes was the closure of a shelter. Moolla said the shelter was infested with rodents, was a fire hazard and people had been living there in "sub-human" conditions.

During last week's raids a number of arrests were made, which included four undocumented foreigners. Moolla said these people would be dealt with by immigration officials.

The raids were the 10th this year, with Moolla having made a number of observations during the year.

One of the most common problems Moolla observed was that of people being squeezed into buildings as an increasing number of unscrupulous landlords popped up, he said. This was because there was a high demand for residential accommodation, which gave rise to these new landlords.

Moolla said building owners were

creating cubicles for people to stay in. He questioned whether these cubicles met the standards and specifications set out by the municipality.

Moolla said the cubicles were more like shacks within a building, as some were no bigger than four square metres but people were charged as much as R2000 a month to live in them.

The overcrowding led to a number of social ills because they became hide-outs for criminals.

Evicting people from the buildings was not a solution in all cases because proper procedures had to be followed, Moolla said.

"We need to look at social housing within the city," he said.

Dr Iqbal Sayed Mohamed, chairperson of the Organisation of Civic Rights and deputy chairperson of the KZN Rental Housing Tribunal, said the city's efforts to tackle bad buildings were welcome, but could cause more problems than they resolved.

Mohamed said in the past two years he had noticed a rise in the number of migrants flocking to occupy these buildings. He said the migrants were easily exploited by building owners, who knew how desperate they were.

These were normally economic migrants and asylum seekers desperate for accommodation, and who would take places in any condition. This was not the only challenge, though, as the demand for student accommodation was also a potential source of conflict, said Mohamed.

He cited the example of a building in Warwick Avenue where people were given a month's notice to make space for student accommodation, which meant that those people had to search for a new place to live in. A balance needed to be found between the two sides' needs, he said.

"There has to be a holistic approach to the needs of the tenants," he said.