

Residents' ire at removals

Student accommodation drive leading to forced evacuation of families in historic suburb

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RESIDENTS of a historic inner-city Durban suburb who successfully resisted apartheid forced removals say they are now being forced out to make way for student accommodation.

Occupants of three blocks of flats in Syringa Avenue in Warwick Avenue Triangle were recently given one month's notice to vacate the flats, sparking a dispute that looks set to become a test case.

The lessor of the building, Mahmood Limalia, intends buying the buildings to convert into student residences for the Durban University of Technology (DUT).

But the Organisation of Civic Rights (OCR) is preparing to take the matter to court on behalf of affected tenants.

OCR chairperson Dr Sayed Iqbal Mohamed argued that DUT and eThekweni Municipality were "indirectly complicit" in the displacement of families and "unlawful actions" of unscrupulous landlords cashing in on the demand to house students.

"OCR is inundated with tenants, mainly families, facing evictions to make way for student accommodation."

He said in addition to the three properties in Syringa Avenue – Bailey Court, Krishna Court and Rosemont – tenants in buildings in Albert Park and Dr Yusuf Dadoo (Grey) streets had also been served with notices to vacate.

He said OCR was also aware of similar cases in the Overport area.

While the DUT has distanced itself from the Syringa Avenue saga, advising that it did not lease the properties, Limalia told the Daily News he had a contract with DUT to provide student accommodation.



RESIDENTS of three blocks of flats in Syringa Avenue in Warwick Avenue Triangle have enlisted the support of Iqbal Mohamed, chairperson of the Organisation for Civic Rights, centre, to prevent them from being evicted from their flats. From left: Yvonne Frankson, Charlotte Davids, Nonhlanhla Ngema, Shanita Ram, Gary Innes, Veronica Waljee and Gail Prince. | ZANELE ZULU African News Agency (ANA)

He said the three buildings, comprising 38 units, were in a state of disrepair, with most tenants in rental arrears.

He confirmed that notices had been given to occupants to vacate by the end of December, and said he was prepared to compensate tenants who agreed to moved out.

"Last Friday, we paid R12 000 to someone who moved to the Bluff. We are not animals, we do not chase people out," said Limalia.

But his offers of compensation were scoffed at by several residents.

"We are an entire close-knit commu-

nity and have nowhere else to go," said Youlene Daniels.

Mohamed said what made the Syringa Avenue case particularly poignant was the fact it was one of the city's first mixed-race suburbs.

"People living here fought against forced removals in the apartheid era, only now to be abandoned by the new democratic government when it comes to housing security," he said.

Mahomed said the principle of "rent to own" should have been implemented in the area a long time ago, with subsidies offered to enable long-standing

residents to become flat owners.

"Instead, we are seeing wealthy property developers moving in and displacing entire families.

"In terms of the Rental Housing Act, it can be argued that replacing one set of tenants with another is an unfair practice. There are several other grounds the Syringa Avenue residents have in their legal defence and are prepared to use these in any legal proceedings."

The municipality was called on to defuse tensions after allegations that armed security guards were used to forcibly remove several occupants from the Syringa Avenue flats.

Limalia dismissed the allegations, countering that a contract worker was assaulted with a hammer at the weekend, resulting in police being called in to prevent further violence.

He said he was prepared to negotiate with residents and the OCR.

In a letter to city manager Sipho Nzuza on Monday, Mohamed called on the municipality to help by providing similar, affordable accommodation within close proximity to Warwick Avenue to families threatened with eviction.

Welcoming the call, leading urban regeneration architect Yusuf Patel said the existing legal framework enabled landlords to take advantage of the demand for student housing without taking into account far-reaching economic and social consequences for established middle and lower-class families living in affected areas. Patel called for more effective town planning policies to cater for student accommodation.

eThekweni spokesperson Mandla Nsele said the Syringa Avenue dispute was best dealt with by the courts.