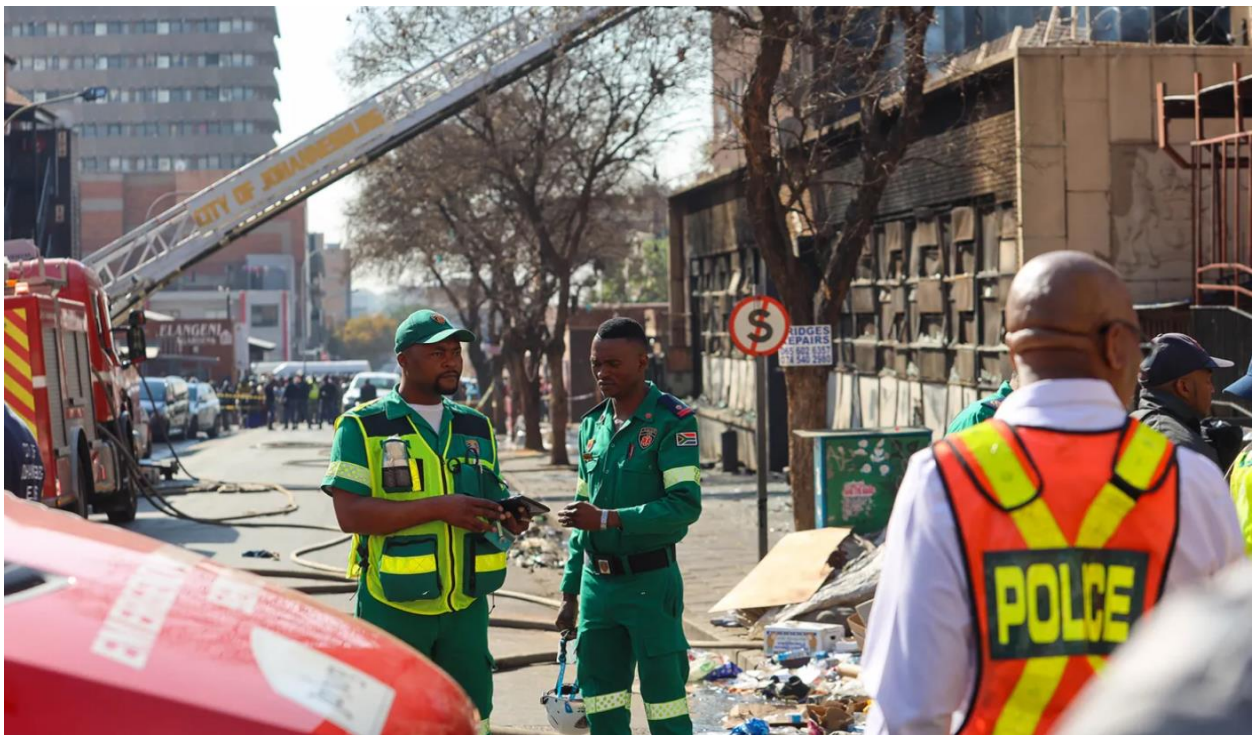


INNER-CITY FIRE ANALYSIS

City of Joburg shuttered task team that should have cleaned up building in which 73 died



The city's Emergency Management Services at the scene of a fire in a multi-storey building in the inner city on the corner of Alberts and Delvers street on 31 August 2023 in Johannesburg, South Africa. According to media reports, 73 people have died and at least 55 others were injured in the fire disaster. (Photo: Gallo Images / Papi Morake)

By Ferial Haffajee

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Exposed: the complete list of 57 hijacked buildings in the inner city.

The City of Johannesburg mothballed a task team to clean up the 80 Albert Street building, where 73 people perished in an inner-city blaze. The building, owned by the City, is one of 57 hijacked buildings that the Johannesburg Property Owners and Managers Association (JPOMA) has identified and repeatedly lobbied the City to act on.

Former mayor Herman Mashaba started the Problematic Properties task team as part of the anti-corruption unit called Group Forensics and Investigations Services. The unit has been near-closed by the City, and with it, the task team that had started to make progress in dealing with the worst hijacked buildings in the City.

For years, Angela Rivers, the general manager of the inner-city property owners, has lobbied to get the City to deal with the buildings that are hazardous for the people who live in them, she says.

The 57 properties are run by syndicates who rent out space to vulnerable residents for between R600 and R1,200 per week, says Rivers. The task team began to make progress. It was a networked group including the police, the JMPD (metro police), JPOMA, Home Affairs and Social Services to clean up the buildings and to prosecute slumlords and the syndicates who now run them.

Rivers said the syndicates are sophisticated and well organised and have morphed from the depictions in films like *Jerusalema* of the earliest incarnations of building hijackers who often took over buildings by gun control. Now, she says, the syndicates arrive at buildings with fraudulent title deeds and utility accounts and make residents pay them.

This is the case at the heritage property, 80 Albert Street, which burnt at dawn and left its residents trapped. Early reports said fire escapes were locked and exits minimal. It is one of the buildings in this database of hijacked properties.

(Naledi Sikhakhane reports [here](#) on how people had to jump with children to escape the flames.)

Rivers said that former mayor Mpho Phalatse tried to resurrect the task team but that it stopped meeting once the opposition coalition government was elected in September 2022. At the last meeting, Rivers was ejected by the new officials who ran it, who told her: “You’re a troublemaker.” When she complained, she received an apology and a promise that she would be invited to follow-up meetings. That was in December 2022, and there have been no follow-up meetings since then.

The City did not immediately respond to queries about the task team. These will be added if it responds.

At the scene, the EFF’s Dr Mgcini Tshwaku, who leads the public safety portfolio, said the City was trying to clean up hijacked buildings but was stopped by civil society (NGOs, he said).

Civil society organisations such as the Socio-Economic Rights Institute (Seri) often represent vulnerable inner-city communities at the mercy of slumlords and aggressive City officials. The City is bound to provide alternative accommodation, but years of corruption have meant that social housing funds are not purposefully used.

City activist Maurice Smithers said that 80 Albert Street was an iconic building in Johannesburg that had now burnt down.

“It was the Albert Street Pass Office which determined which black South Africans could live and work in Joburg. Its transformation from a place of oppression and despair to one of hope when it was turned into a women’s shelter and clinic was a significant symbolic moment. So, the failure by the City to maintain the building as a heritage site and to support the NGO which was there (Usindiso Ministries, which ran the shelter) is equal to its failure to ensure the building complied with all relevant laws and by-laws. [It has] instead effectively turned a blind eye to its hijacking and deterioration into a place of death.”

Helpline

A call centre has been set up to help families locate missing people or bodies. The numbers are: 0800 203 886, 011 241 5767 and 011 355 3048. The bodies have been taken to Diepkloof mortuary and the survivors to Helen Joseph, Charlotte Maxeke, Chris Hani Baragwanath, Tembisa Provincial and South Rand hospitals. **DM**