

Why were 200 people living in a building not fit for housing, Cyril Ramaphosa asks

The president says SA has progressive laws and housing policies, including the emergency housing programme

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Firefighters at the building in the Johannesburg CBD. Picture: ANTONIO MUCHAVE

Serious questions must be asked about why bylaws are not being enforced across vast swathes of certain cities and how the laws and regulations designed to protect tenants from arbitrary eviction have been used by criminal “slumlords” to prey on society’s most vulnerable.

These are the words of President Cyril Ramaphosa, who questioned the circumstances in which buildings have become run down, attracting crime and further compounding the problem.

He said it was important to ask serious questions about the responsibility of owners and landlords of inner-city buildings in Johannesburg and major cities around the country that have either been abandoned or fallen into ruin.

Through his weekly newsletter, the president emphasised in the aftermath of the Joburg fire tragedy, that it was crucial to ask how about 200 people were occupying a building that was not built for housing, was unsafe and had no basic services.

“Last Thursday, we woke to the news that a building in downtown Johannesburg was on fire with many of its inhabitants still trapped inside. As emergency services worked at the scene, we heard harrowing accounts of people being forced to jump out of windows, of those who lost all their meagre possessions, and of mothers losing contact with their children as they tried to escape the inferno,” Ramaphosa said.

“Seventy-six lives have been lost. Twelve of the deceased were children. Scores were badly injured. There are few words that can convey the immensity of this tragedy. Our hearts are heavy,” he said.

The president said at a time like this, the country had to embrace its common humanity; it did not matter what the nationalities of the inhabitants were or whether they were documented.

“What matters is that, as a people of empathy and compassion, we rally around the survivors who have lost everything, and who are struggling to come to terms with what has happened to them,” he said.

Ramaphosa commended the firefighters who responded swiftly to put out the fire, alongside the relief organisations, municipal officials, national departments, embassies, civil society groups and members of the public who have come to the aid of those who lost loved ones and are supporting those left destitute.

He said SA has progressive laws and housing policies, including the emergency housing programme.

“There are landmark court judgments on the rights of tenants and the responsibilities of the state to people facing eviction, regardless of their immigration status. We need to examine how our policies are being implemented and how they can be improved,” he said.

Ramaphosa said the victims of the Marshalltown fire weren’t only the poorest of the poor, but were reportedly undocumented migrants, who were vulnerable to exploitation.

“Dealing decisively with illegal immigration is a priority because regularising the immigration status of all those who have the legal right to be in our country helps protect them from exploitation.”

The president said there were complaints about employers who flout the law and hire illegal immigrants so they can pay them less, and corrupt individuals in the state working with criminal syndicates to get fraudulent documents for those desperate to remain in the country.

“This tragedy has brought to the fore the need to resolve the challenge of housing in our cities. Even though millions of houses have been built since the advent of democracy, providing decent homes for over 14-million people, the demand for housing continues to grow.”

He said the movement of large numbers of people into major centres fuelled the growth of informal settlements and placed further strain on infrastructure and services.

“As a starting point, municipal authorities across the country dealing with inner-city decay need to redouble their efforts to revitalise these areas, use regulatory and legislative provisions to safeguard human life, and hold landlords whose premises have become headquarters of criminal activity accountable.”

Ramaphosa noted some progress areas, referring to how Joburg reportedly managed to return 47 “hijacked” buildings to their lawful owners.

“Once rehabilitated, these buildings could provide safe and decent low-cost housing for the poor. There needs to be greater co-operation between municipal officials and inner-city property owners and developers.

“We need clean, safe, liveable and vibrant inner cities that attract people to live, work or study. We want our inner cities to attract businesses and investment.

We cannot allow certain parts of our cities to suffer chronic neglect and become 'no-go areas' because of rampant criminal activity.”

A collaborative effort between the government, private sector, individuals, communities and civil society organisations was necessary to pave a way forward, he said.

“We have to obey the law and observe regulations that exist for our safety and for the safety of others. We need to work with officials seeking to strike a balance between the rights of tenants and regard for their safety and wellbeing. Above all, we need to report acts of criminality and not be party to them.”

Ramaphosa said that like everyone else, the people living in that building and in similar conditions elsewhere wanted a decent quality of life and a safe place to live close to work opportunities and services.

“We have a shared responsibility, as government, business and civil society, to do everything we can to provide support and protection. Let us work with, and not against, each other. Let this tragedy compel us to work much harder to give effect to the human dignity that is the right of us all.”