

Sunday, 14 February 2016.

Masi: Another devastating, yet preventable crises.

I am sorry to pepper you with another account of events in Masiphumelele.

The situation

At noon last Friday I drove to Ukhanyo Primary School, Pokela Road in Masi, to attend a briefing meeting about unresolved issues pertaining to the 29 November 2015, fire victims.

Next, as we waited in the road, we saw dark smoke rising in the direction of the 'wetlands' area. Within minutes flames leaked higher than the electricity poles. One amongst us phoned the fire services. The first of 15-odd fire vehicles arrived within ten minutes. Despite their professional conduct, they soon lost control. The south-easter fanned the flames and cables between electric poles burnt to what sounded like rapid gunshot fire. Eventually the cables snapped, shooting burning bits of rubber coated copper on top of, and into homes, further afield.

In the terribly congested area, chaos and pandemonium ensued. Women and children were bailing clothes and mattresses out of windows, often throwing them down the stairs of the double-storey shacks, then bundling things up and running from the heat. Others were running toward the fire trying to save – if they could – their meagre belongings. Inevitably, hundreds of onlookers also converged and on rickety structures tried to get a better vantage point. Not all who ran were South Africans; a group of north African men suffered the same fate. At least one madam complicated the traffic flow by racing her domestic worker into the scene – and then waiting in her car for the 'maid' to return. But there was real compassion also. From our neighbourhood people offered their bakkies to load up possessions and drive them to safety. With several (white) men, I carried bedding, stoves, suitcases and fridges to safety in an open field.

MP Adams who had come to be briefed about the previous fire, became a hero when he carried a woman from her shack after part of her burning roof fell on her whilst she gathered her clothes. Rescue services soon attended to the dazed mother and her children. Cats and dogs had a bad day too, being cornered in the narrow alleys between burning homes.

It is terrible to see people fleeing with bags on their backs or on their heads, and toddlers running with pots, plates and food for the evening's dinner. Some asked: can I trust you? Will you stay with my bags while I run in one more time to see what I can get out? Women and men who

later arrived back from work, found no more than the charred springs of their mattresses, chairs and other items.

Eventually a series of helicopters arrived to gush water on the flaming homes. They got the job done but I heard more than once the accusation: white property must now be threatened (it was, by this time, it is true) – they would not come out for us. Such is the depth of disaffection!

A faulty electricity meter is blamed on the fire. I venture to add that when you live in informal structures without plugs and cables hidden in walls or under floors, expect faulty connections to short and cause fires[1]. Add to this the congested living conditions and fires are, whatever the precautions, next to unavoidable.

Interim Relief.

On Friday night a new contingent of at least 1000 homeless people joined those in the community hall waiting since the previous fire. In the dark, people were carrying furniture through the alleys of Masi. Where to I asked? We want our friends to look after this until.....

Instead of piling more people into the hopelessly inadequate Masi community hall, why has the Fish Hoek community hall not been made available? What about the churches and schools – all with fine facilities?

Longer term arrangements.

The Sub-Council, the Cape Town Council and political leaders of whatever political persuasion should demand that 10 hectares of land, bought by the City for the expansion of Masi, be immediately freed up! Technically this requires having a RoD rescinded. (A Record of Decision that conferred environmental status on land sold by Sanparks for housing). But it also requires political will. The land is there, but the City seems to have changed its attitude to Masi, and want to contain any further expansion. To me it seems that our entire political establishment, across the board, is sleepwalking into deeper trouble.

1. Fact: Erf 5131 is far larger than the City admitted until this morning (on CapeTalk). City spokespersons preferred to exclude 5.32 hectares from Erf 5131 on the western edge. Why? There is even infrastructure (water, toilets, electricity) available at the sports field that could be used in this emergency.
2. Fact: There is more land available, across Kommetjie Road, known as Solole. It also has important suitable infrastructure on it.

Surely, somewhere there is political will and desire to fast-track regulatory measures, so that people can be accommodated on land that

is available so not recreate the conditions that can only lead to more fires?

Radio reports yesterday state "the fire might not have been started accidentally". I (and those this might be aimed at) take note of such insinuation. Such cynical statements beggar belief!

Thank you to all who signal your support and that something has to be done to change the injustice in our midst.

Yours,

Horst.

[1] Hi Rose ..my name is xxxxx I got your number from Masi (facebook)..i am residing in yyyyy informal settlement the reason i am writing is connection of eletricity ..i am not having eletricity box in my shack and i am worried cause i waited and waited for the people who were doing project here putting boxes in other shacks but they never came back ...i am worried that i have to get eletricity by connecting a wires from other shack which is not safe at all sometimes the wires are disconnected i scared of using parraffin cause i have 6weeks baby...is there anything you can help me to get my own eletricity box?...i know there are people who are in very bad situation like those fire victims...