



A BUILDING MARKED BY FIRE AND DEATH SHOWS THE DECAY OF SOUTH AFRICA'S 'CITY OF GOLD' - ASSOCIATED PRESS

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One of the few things that survived the fire and smoke that caused at least 76 horrific deaths in a rundown apartment block in Johannesburg is a circular plaque hanging on the brown brick exterior. It has a five-sentence inscription outlining the building's history.

No. 80 Albert Street - the scene of one of South Africa's worst inner-city tragedies - was a central pass office during the apartheid era of racial segregation, a checkpoint for enforcing a despised law that controlled the movement of Black people nearly everywhere in the country.

Without a pass from the apartheid government to work there, people were "denied a place" in Johannesburg, the inscription reads.

What it doesn't say is that the building still saw people excluded up until last Thursday, nearly 30 years after apartheid ended, when a fire swept through it and killed dozens of South Africans and poor foreign migrants clinging on at the fringes of society in a city claiming to be Africa's richest.

The approximately 200 families living there were desperate for some form of accommodation and found a five-story block that had been left derelict and abandoned by authorities. They were paying rent to unofficial "landlords," who had illegally taken over the building.

It's what is known in Johannesburg as a "hijacked building." There are hundreds of them in the crumbling city center.

They've come to embody the decay of South Africa's most important city and, beyond that, what so many view as the larger failure of a post-apartheid government to provide a dignified life for many of the poor Black majority.

What appeared to anger South Africans in the aftermath of the nighttime fire that killed entire families was the admission by city officials that it was a city-owned building. Yet they hadn't taken responsibility for it or for its inhabitants, who lived in shacks crammed into every corner, even the parking garage.

"This has been a long time coming and it will keep happening until the city wakes up. It's devastating," said Angela Rivers, general manager of the Johannesburg Property Owners and Managers Association. Rivers said that numerous government departments were

aware of the appalling conditions of hijacked buildings across the city center, but "they don't take it seriously."

South African President Cyril Ramaphosa visited the scene of the fire, put himself among the poor of downtown Johannesburg, and tried to reassure them.



"We are a caring government," Ramaphosa said. "It may fall short, but the determination to care for the people of South Africa is a priority."

The promises are wearing thin from the government of the ruling African National Congress party, which led South Africa out of apartheid and has been in power since the first democratic elections in 1994.

Johannesburg is a focal point for the perceived failures. The infrastructure of the city is in deep trouble almost everywhere, from burst water pipes, cracked roads, a malfunctioning electricity supply, and trash piling up on street corners.

Founded on a huge gold reef little more than 100 years ago, Johannesburg was always a destination for Black South Africans, initially men who left their wives and children to board steam trains to the city to work in the gold mines, a journey jazz great Hugh Masekela sang about in "Stimela." It is one of the most vivid songs of South Africa.

The city saw rapid and recent urbanization after apartheid and its pass laws were dismantled, going from a population of 1.8 million in 1990 to an estimated 6 million now. People keep coming to the "city of gold."

What they find now is the surrounding Gauteng province's unemployment rate of 36% — even higher than South Africa's national figure of 33%, itself the worst in the world. Around 1.2 million people in the province don't have housing, officials said, with much of the crisis playing out in Johannesburg.

"The general sense is that things have gotten worse with time," said Lebogang Lechuba of the South African Cities Network, which analyses urban development. "(But) there are more people coming to the city. That does not change."

The warning signs for Johannesburg began in the late 1990s as the big companies left downtown for the new financial district of Sandton, about 10 miles (16 kilometers) to the north. Johannesburg still has more millionaires than any other city on the continent, according to this year's World's Wealthiest Cities Report. But the chasm between the silver high-rises of Sandton and the old heart of Johannesburg underlines why South Africa is one of the most unequal countries in the world.

As the money seeped away, the degradation of central Johannesburg initially was slow, said Volker von Widdern, a risk analyst for businesses, until it reached a tipping point.

"One domino falls, maybe. We don't fully appreciate what the full effect of 20 dominoes falling may be," von Widdern told the Moneyweb financial news website. "It has a cumulative impact and then, unfortunately, it has a catastrophic impact."

Johannesburg voters have turned away from the ruling ANC recently, but that has done nothing to enhance the city's prospects and has only led to a series of political coalitions that have failed. The city has had six mayors in less than two years.

The failure of basic infrastructure also brings a much greater threat to the social foundation of a country, said professor Yunus Ballim of Johannesburg's University of the Witwatersrand. Ballim, a civil engineering expert, went on national television last month following an underground gas explosion in Johannesburg about a mile from Albert Street that was blamed on poorly maintained pipes.

But what he started to speak about was that every failure to provide a house, running water, and electricity for South Africans eroded their faith in their post-apartheid democracy, which has guaranteed freedom for every citizen and no more pass laws, but hasn't yet

delivered housing or jobs for millions.

Ballim posed a question on why frustrated, poor protesters sometimes burn clinics or schools.



"Perhaps ... they've lost their confidence in the ability of the clinic to do what it was meant to do," he said.

Rivers, whose association works with derelict buildings in Johannesburg, said one of the most desperate situations she came across was a pregnant woman going into labor alone in the wet, cold basement of a hijacked property that had no electricity or running water.

The woman, Rivers said, refused to go to a hospital because she was so scared she'd lose her place to live in the building and had no faith there'd be another home for her and her child.

"This baby was born in the dark," Rivers said.

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Imray reported from Cape Town, South Africa.

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