

# George building collapse: 44 remain missing

By  Katja Hamilton

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The death toll from the building that collapsed in George in the Western Cape has risen to 14.



Source: CHRO. Employment and Labour Minister Thulas Nxesi.

The collapsed multi-story building - located on Victoria street in George CBD - was under construction and earmarked to be a 42-unit apartment block.

It is estimated that 88 people were on site at the time of the incident, and excavation efforts are underway to recover 44 workers who remain missing.

Among those individuals who have been rescued alive, 15 are in critical condition, six are facing life-threatening injuries, and seven have sustained minor injuries.

Allegations are that a significant number of individuals employed at the site are undocumented foreign nationals, which is creating a logistical challenge as far as communicating with some of the families in their home language. As a result, the Department of International Relations and Cooperation has been outsourced to address this need.

"We need to talk to the various missions who are here in South Africa to send their people... so they can communicate properly with the families," Nxesi said.

## Government investigation underway

The collapse seemed inevitable, yet the building owners neglected to take action due to their greed, Gugulethu Khonono, the uncle of Siphesihle Mehlo, a 21-year-old artisan studying at a local college claimed.

He mentioned that there were cracks in and around the building, but they were merely covered up with cement instead of being properly addressed.

Lieutenant General Tebello Mosikili, deputy commissioner of the South African Police Service, said an investigation is under way to determine the cause of the event.

A number of national department Ministers, including Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs, Human Settlements, Police and Social Development, have interest in the matter.



### George collapse survivor returns to site to 'check on guys'

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Employment and Labour Minister, Thulas Nxesi who has visited the site of the collapsed building, interacted with the local and provincial government to get an update from rescuers and Occupational Health and Safety inspectors from the department, who were dispatched to the site.

Briefing media, Nxesi said the police are currently "in control" at this stage and will be allowed to do their own work unhindered until their investigation is complete.

"At some stage, once they are done with their work, the police will hand over to the Department of Employment and Labour, which will be able to start with its own investigation. Our investigations are informed by the Occupational Health and Safety Act, in particular Section 31 and 32, [which guides what] normally happens when we face such incidents," Nxesi said.

"We cannot at this stage confirm that there are undocumented people amongst those that were trapped, amongst those that were rescued," he said.

## Developer's plans under scrutiny

The developer, NeoTrend Group submitted its plans in December 2022, with approval granted in July 2023.

Nxesi emphasised that the department did not want to speculate on what transpired but will leave everything to the investigations.

"Once the investigations have been able to expose the facts, we will talk to that," he said.

He noted that while the department has compensation to give, this can only be done once all the people have been identified.

He said there is no timeline for the investigation, as it will depend on what is uncovered during the investigation, and the police will hand over the site to the department.

## Minister urges employer co-operation

The Minister further appealed to the employer of the construction workers or the construction owners to come forward and talk with the families of the workers.

“Thus far, in terms of what I’ve been briefed, we do not know where they are,” Nxesi said.

Paarl-based consulting engineer Athol Mitchell, known in the industry, was initially reported missing but has been found. He signed off on the ill-fated 75 Victoria project in George.

Meanwhile, family, friends and relatives have been holding a vigil near the site.

*This is a developing story*

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