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MEDIA STATEMENT

Friday, 01 September 2023

SALGA expresses condolences over Johannesburg building fire tragedy

The South African Local Government Association (SALGA) wishes to extend its deepest condolences to the grieving families and friends affected by the tragic loss of 73 lives in the devastating fire that engulfed a five-story building in Johannesburg. The incident occurred during the early hours of Thursday morning, resulting in the loss of lives and leaving at least forty-three individuals injured.

On behalf of the Organized Local Government, Cllr Mluleki Ronald Nkosi, Chairperson of SALGA's National Working Group on Emergency Services and Disaster Management has called for collective action and responsibility from all concerned authorities concerning the support of victim's families and to prevent the recurrence of such incidents.

Cllr Nkosi says: "The loss of lives is an immense tragedy and is regrettable. While the cause of the fire needs to be investigated, we do know that the circumstances leading to this tragedy are rooted in multifaceted challenges at various levels. The complex issues of rapid urbanization, and the need for housing on the one hand. Unscrupulous individuals who take advantage of desperate vulnerable people making them live in high-risk buildings and land illegally.

It is essential to strengthen our country's laws and municipal by-laws relating to security of tenure, especially for the poor and vulnerable while also preventing them from unlawful occupation of land and premises."

The Prevention of Illegal Eviction Act, while well-intended, has inadvertently created risks and bottlenecks in managing where people should and shouldn't live. It is essential for this progressive piece of law to be amended in order to strengthen it and remove its unintended adverse consequences. Similarly, SALGA welcomes the current process to amend the Unlawful Entry into Premises to strengthen the balanced provision of shelter while removing the risks such as seen in this unfortunate tragedy.

"The dire need for land and suitable housing in accessible locations perpetuates the cycle of vulnerability. Desperate individuals seek shelter in any available space close to employment opportunities, making them susceptible to exploitation by unscrupulous actors driven by financial, political, or other narrow interests. Neglectful absentee landlords, further compound the challenges associated with these high-risk properties," Cllr Nkosi says.

SALGA remains committed to working alongside the City of Johannesburg and stakeholders to mitigate risks, strengthen and enforce bylaws, and provide sustainable solutions that prioritize the safety and well-being of all citizens.

"In the wake of this tragedy, we must also recognize the remarkable efforts of the firefighters who displayed immense courage in their attempts to save lives and minimize the loss of life." Cllr Nkosi concludes.

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Issued by: South African Local Government Association

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