

# Joburg inferno: Coalition chaos killed plans to fix slums, set course for deadly disaster

Azarrah Karrim, Alex Patrick and Iwan Pijoo

- Political instability in the City of Johannesburg saw projects to deal with hijacked buildings and undocumented migrants stifled.
- The revolving door of leadership led to lapsed by-laws which hampered essential services in the city.
- Seventy-six people died in South Africa's worst building fire to date.

Fragile coalitions, a revolving door of leadership and institutional failures in Johannesburg delivered the devastating Marshalltown blaze that has left 76 people - among them 12 children - dead.

On Thursday morning, scores of people ran through a squalid, burning maze in a dilapidated Albert Street building - a slum that housed hundreds.

Fire quickly spread through the building, and people were seen jumping several storeys to escape the flames.

[Johannesburg has seen six mayors](#) in just 22 months and ensuing political instability has seen efforts to deal with hijacked buildings like 80 Albert Street, and undocumented immigrants who occupy them, stifled since at least 2019.

Other functions hobbled is the fire service, which has been plagued by dire shortages of fire trucks, and instability at the entity tasked to oversee Johannesburg's properties, including 80 Albert Street.

It takes years of system failures to get to this point, with bouts of political turbulence each forming a link in the chain of disaster.

In 2019, Dr Mpho Phalatse, while health MMC, instigated efforts to assist undocumented migrants who occupied hijacked buildings, together with the Department of Home Affairs, police and other city departments.

In 2022, DA Caucus leader Belinda Kayser-Echeozonjoku said the administration tried to do block-by-block inspections in the inner city to identify dilapidated, unsafe, and unhealthy properties.

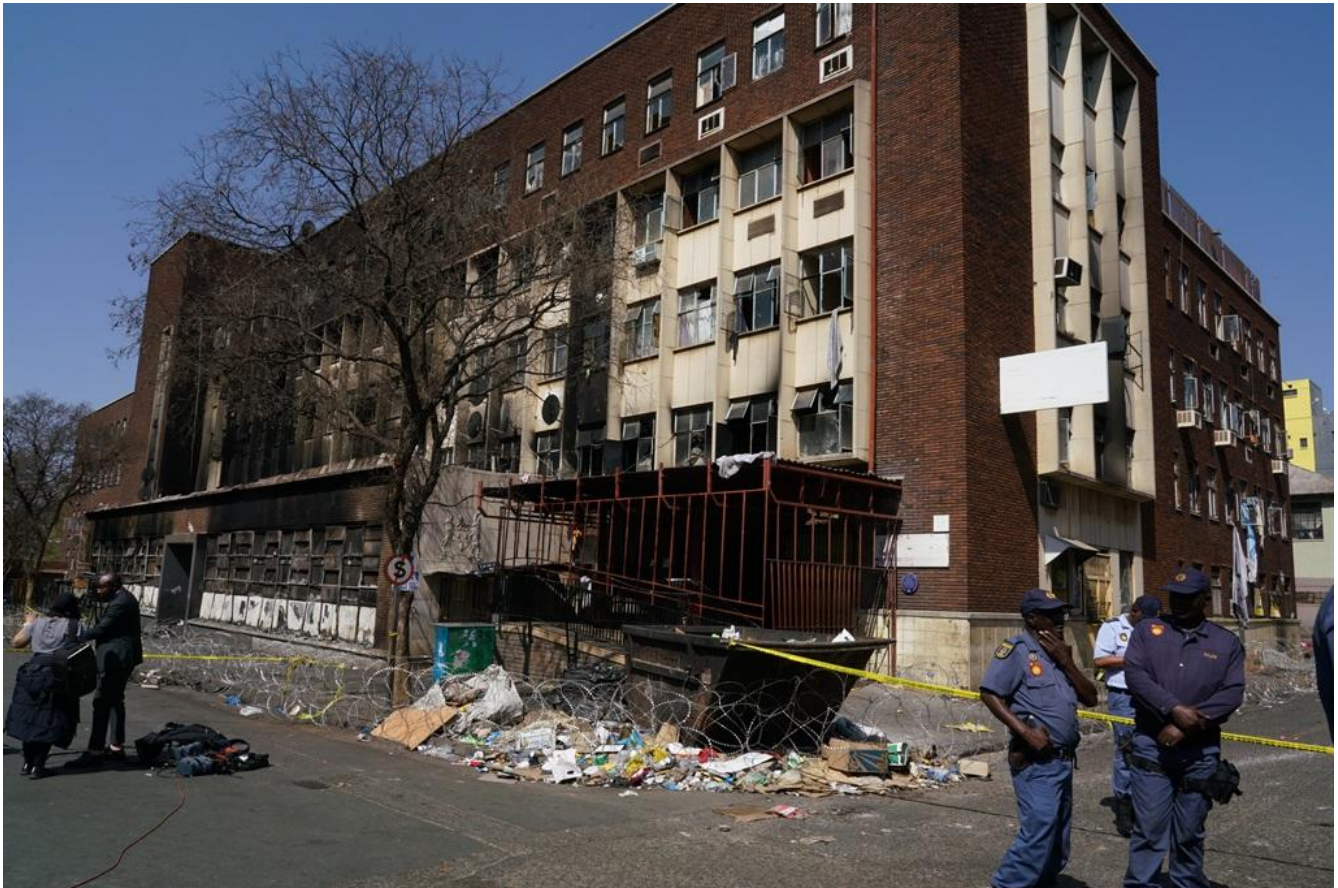
When the new ANC/EFF/Patriotic Alliance coalition took over in January this year, these efforts were abandoned. City fathers started afresh.

### **Efforts stifled**

The 2019 cross-governmental operation, involving Phalatse, planned to have more frequent raids of hijacked properties and work towards temporary accommodation for undocumented migrants, sharing the financial and administrative load of the task between local and national departments.

"Unfortunately, this meeting happened close to our ousting in January.

"Otherwise, the minister was quite keen to have us establish work streams and one the work streams was around hijacked properties," Phalatse said.



*The death toll from Thursday's five-story building fire rose to 76 on Friday following the death of two others.  
Alfonso Nqunjana/News24*

She added they had ongoing meetings, updates on problematic buildings and which buildings had been handed over to the private sector.

Entities like the Johannesburg Property Company (JPC) and development planning were working together to assist developers to fast-track approval processes of rehabilitation.

Phalatse said:

***It was going well, the only challenge we had was temporary emergency accommodation, otherwise we would have moved a lot quicker.***

News24 previously reported that the building, once a haven for abused women run by an NGO named Usindiso Ministries, was condemned by City officials. David Tembe, the former Joburg metro police chief and ActionSA politician who served as MMC for public safety took part in these efforts.

He told News24 that he while MMC, he was going to commission a legal opinion on the building and, based on that, recommend it be demolished.

"Once the building is condemned there is nothing you can do, you have to demolish it and we can then rebuild it. We made a plan, but a new [local] government came in," Tembe previously said.

When Phalatse became mayor in 2021, the City created a draft integrated development plan (IDP) which included the Albert Street building under capital projects, which would receive a R20 million injection in 2024.

This would mean the building was part of the City's policies to identify and prioritise capital projects, specifically looking at efforts to provide services to marginalised groups, information areas and requirements to upgrade infrastructure.

The building is not mentioned in the final IDP.

Other efforts included the one led by Kayser-Echeozonjoku to carry out block-by-block inspections.

It was an operation which started last year and included Emergency Management Services (EMS), environmental health, local and national law enforcement, social development, and group forensics.

Before they could get to 80 Albert Street, the coalition was kicked out for the first-time last year. By January this year, Phalatse and the party were again ousted.

Current ANC Economic Development MMC Nomoya Mnisi told News24 none of these programmes were continued.

Mnisi said:

***You would appreciate there has not been stability in leadership and administration in Johannesburg with these coalitions.***

"If we find a progressive programme that is benefitting our people we do continue with such programmes. There is nothing that we will reject just because it's a different government."

She added they had recently put in place their own version of the programme after receiving complaints by private property owners that their properties were illegally occupied.

The JPC was ultimately responsible for the maintenance of the building but, Mnisi said, when the new coalition took charge, they had to restore "stability to the leadership of the entity".

In May 2021, the CEO of the JPC, corruption-accused [Helen Botes and acting CFO Imraan Bhamjee were suspended](#) after a Special Investigation Unit (SIU) report implicated them in Covid-19 corruption.

Later, a new board was installed which was to clean up the challenged entity.



*A survivor of the fire that ripped through a five-storey building in the early hours of Thursday killing 76 people, rests in a shelter in Johannesburg. Guillem Sartorio/ AFP*

Mnisi said when they came in, they had reinstated Botes after a report vindicated her while also bringing in a new board to restore stability to the entity.

A tender to rehabilitate 80 Albert Street never made it through the previous board, she added, as the envisaged purpose of the property was disputed.

### **Coalition chaos**

Governance expert Ivor Chipkin said the heart of coalition chaos in South Africa was "there is no real distinction between the political class and the administrative class".

He added the appointment process for politicians and administrators should be completely different but, "that is absolutely not the case that we have here".

Every time a government changes, the administration suffered "extraordinary instability", Chipkin said.

"It's especially acute with the instability in Joburg where these coalitions don't last for more than a few weeks or months and every time there is a new administration and a new political alliance there is complete chaos in the administration.

"This is the underlying cause of so many of South Africa's and I think at the heart of some of the big problems in Joburg."

### **City policy**

The instability in Johannesburg led to policy lapses which had a knock-on effect on other City entities.

Louis Pretorius, a health and safety risk fire and environmental specialist consultant, referred to the SA National Standards (SANS) building regulations which underline the owner of a building is responsible for its safety.

"This includes fire exits, water, sprinklers, and the type of walling used as a fire retardant and hose reel. Regardless of who is staying in it, it is the owner's responsibility."

City spokesperson Nthatisi Modingoane previously admitted the City did not meet fire codes which outlined requirements for emergency services' operational and fire safety functions. Modingoane said the City did not have sufficient fire engines, water tankers; ladder and hazardous material vehicles etc. to "service the communities in an efficient and effective manner".



*SAPS' K-9 Unit arrived at the burned building in Albert Street in Johannesburg on Friday. Luca Sola/AFP*

At the beginning of the month, the [City said it had 16 fire engines](#). The SANS code calls for 70.

These vehicles are shared between 30 fire stations which should have at least two fire engines each.

On Thursday afternoon, Brink said the fire was called in at 01:19 and the first responder arrived on scene at 01:21.

He added they then rapidly deployed two fire engines, an industrial pumper, a heavy rescue vehicle, an air truck, two level two incident command vehicles, a Bronto ladder truck, 43 firefighters and 14 officers.

Brink added the response was in line with SA National Standards on Community Fire and Safety requirements for a five-storey building.

### **Cancelled tenders**

On 19 July, the City cancelled its R178 million contract with Marcé Fire Fighting Technology for 17 specialised fire engines to boost Johannesburg's flailing "Red Fleet" of fire and rescue vehicles to meet emergency demands.

It followed years of failed attempts to remedy the City's lack of fire trucks - a process plagued by irregularities and legal processes which resulted in one official being dismissed and another given a final written warning.

Brink said the contract - announced in January by former mayor Mpho Phalatse - was terminated because the bank guarantee was non-compliant.

On Friday, council speaker Colleen Makhubele said six people, including a critically injured person, were admitted to hospital.

Makhubele expressed concern some residents, who occupied the Marshalltown building, were refusing treatment at hospitals.

"There is one who refused treatment because he is a foreign national, and he actually ran away.

"We are still calling on foreign nationals who need attention, whether it is shelter or medical care, to come forth. We are not looking at documentation; we are looking at this as a humanitarian crisis," she said.