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Registering their grievances ... Sasolburg residents attending a meeting called by cooperative governance minister, Richard Baloyi

Police reinforcements and cooperative governance minister's decision to halt the proposed merger have restored a fragile peace and calm in the volatile area

Uneasy calm has returned to the burning streets of Sasolburg following the most violent strike against the merger of the Metsimaholo Local Municipality with Ngwathe Local Municipality.

This follows the decisive intervention of co-operative governance minister, Richard Baloyi, on Tuesday when he took a decision to stop the merger. Baloyi said the issue of demarcation was misinterpreted by residents, and that a task team will be established to address the municipal demarcation issue.

Police also reinforced their manpower in the area on Wednesday and manned every corner of the town and the nearby Zamdela township. They conducted overnight raids in Zamdela following a day of deadly protests and looting. Police provincial spokesperson, Sam Makhele, said police conducted door-to-door searches and recovered some of the looted property.

"Building material was recovered from a number of houses in the area and those found in possession of looted goods have been arrested," he said.

Residents of Zamdela in Sasolburg went on a rampage from Sunday last week and looted shops and burnt property including municipal buildings in an apparent protest against a decision to incorporate their town into a neighbouring Ngwathe Local Municipality.

The violence resulted in the death of at least two people. One person was killed Tuesday when protestors attempted to storm into a police station while the second person was shot dead by a business owner who fired at a mob that attacked his shop.

Police remain on high alert and residents have promised to continue with their protest until officials from the Demarcation Board come to the area to give them an assurance that the merger process has been halted as directed by the minister.

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The department said it would allow a broader consultation process with affected communities to air their concerns.

“Our members are out in the street monitoring the situation to prevent the outbreak of violence,” said Makhele.

On Tuesday police said 180 people had been arrested for public violence, looting and malicious damage to property, after two days of rioting. They barricaded streets with burning tyres and burnt down cars, with dozens injured as police fired rubber bullets. A truck was hijacked and some protestors tried to use it to force open an ATM in the CBD.

Local religious leaders have called for peace and calm in the area. The Free State Council of Churches’ Reverend Simon Xaba said it was time for communities to talk to their leaders and to find an amicable solution to the problem.

“Look at how innocent people lost their goods and property. Other people have lost their lives unnecessarily. We want to make sure that no one loses his/her life again. Both parties must involved in the process must make peace,” said Xaba.

Xaba’s call follows the spreading of the protest to other areas on Wednesday. They include Phiri Tona outside Heilbron where communities looted foreign shops calling for their town’s incorporation into Metsimaholo Local Municipality. Sporadic protests also took place in Deneysville.

Heilbron resident said they have asked for their incorporation into Metsimaholo since 2007 but to no avail.

Selina Godongwane told The Weekly in a telephonic interview that the town has not benefited anything from being part of Ngwathe Local Municipality. “We have tried to convince the ANC and government that we were supposed to be part of Metsimaholo not Ngwathe but they ignored us. We don’t want to be part of Parys. I am in support with what the community of Metsimaholo is saying; they have they have motivated us a lot.”

“We knew that the denial for us not to be joined to Metsimaholo was for some people to come up with the proposed merger which is not going to happen. We have started to show our dissatisfaction and we will keep on doing it,” said Nkosinathi Mthenjwa.

The initial strike was started by the community of Zamdela, on Sunday which called for the proposed merger Ngwathe and Metsimaholo local municipalities.

Residents of Metsimaholo slammed their council for voting in support of the proposed merger without proper consultation with them. Many councillors have gone in hiding after facing the wrath of residents who accused them of conspiracy.

Zamdela residents have vowed not to retreat from protesting until all their demands are met. Some residents have lost their jobs as a result of the protests.

Maserame Mosikili told The Weekly that most of the residents live in fear of their safety and that of their children. Schooling also came to a halt. “I was told by my boss that she is looking for someone to replace me, we lose our jobs and our children can’t attend school because we don’t have a way to do that, if they see us they beat us,” said Mosikili.

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The strike also affected oil giant, Sasol, with some of the company employees not being able to go to work. Ntsiki Mazibuko said she feared losing her house and property if she goes to work "I rather lose my job than my house or be accused of being sell outs. Sasol is aware of the situation and it cannot just fire people as it please. I believe it will also challenge government because its production is affected."

Police has promised to make more arrests soon. Foreign shop owners have been given temporary shelter at Abrahams Rust Resort. They pleaded with the community to not target them or their business.

"We are like them, we live with them in the area but they victimise us. I just call on them to give us a chance to live with them. I don't mind what I lost because I won't get it back," said Salif Hassan.

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