







# MOTHER CITY

## ARE HOMELESS BEING FORCED OUT?

With less than six weeks until the 2010 FIFA World Cup kickoff, the mother city is in the final throes of an extreme makeover. But does making the city pretty for World Cup visitors mean removing “unsightly” homeless adults and street kids too? Brendon Bosworth investigates.



# MAKEOVER:

**T**here's been an outcry – both in South Africa and abroad – over widespread reports that homeless clean-up operations are being carried out in host cities ahead of the 2010 Soccer World Cup.

In Johannesburg, human rights group Solidarity Peace Trust reports that Zimbabwean refugees have been targeted under the city's zero-tolerance campaign and are being arrested and removed from certain areas on charges of loitering. Prostitutes, beggars and street vendors are allegedly also being targeted by the Johannesburg Metro police's "clean-up" of the city.

Despite Metro Mike's (eThekweni municipal manager Michael Sutcliffe) reassurances last April that street kids would not be rounded up and dumped on the outskirts of town, there have been well-documented reports of Durban's Metro police doing just that.

Cape Town hasn't sidestepped the media storm either — there's been a frenzy of foreign media reports on allegations that the City of

Cape Town is forcibly relocating street people to settlements such as "Blikkiesdorp" (tin-town), a charge the DA-led city vehemently denies.

"It is absolute nonsense," asserts Lesley de Reuck, Cape Town's 2010 Operations Director. "I'm speechless to think that in this day and age people can think that somebody will just round people up."

That's not to say the city doesn't have a policy in place to deal with the homeless during the World Cup, and in February it released the "2010 Street People Readiness Plan". The city, however, is denying the plan is a way to rid Cape Town's streets of the homeless during the soccer extravaganza. Rather, says Ernest Sonnenburg, Chairman of the city's Homeless Agency Committee, it is simply an extension of the same programme implemented during the winter months over the past two years in partnership with NGOs such as The Haven and The Ark.

"We open the doors of the shelters so people can come in freely and provide

additional funds for extra food and bedding," says Sonnenburg. "The 2010 strategy is exactly the same, but we've gone broader and approached NGOs and shelters in Gordon's Bay, Brackenfell and other areas. We're going to need more space because we're going to have an influx of people coming to seek job opportunities."

He adds that his committee is also focused on "community of origin" programmes, also in partnership with NGOs working with youth and street children. The "community of origin" programme is aimed at entertaining and educating youth to keep them busy after school and during holidays so they don't migrate into the CBD and get drawn onto the streets.

According to social workers in the field, this is particularly important during the extended school holiday period over the World Cup when some children are expected to be at high risk of becoming involved in life on the streets and the associated dangers.

Linzi Thomas of MyLife, a non-profit



organisation working to rehabilitate street youth, says she is concerned that street children and other “day strollers” drawn to the city during the holidays, will be extremely vulnerable to drug peddlers and paedophiles, including so-called “sex tourists” during the World Cup period.

The city’s “community of origin” programmes go hand-in-hand with ongoing projects the city is running in conjunction with NGO partners. Paul Hooper, Chairman of the Western Cape Street Children’s Forum, notes that these programmes have led to a substantial reduction in the number of street children in the CBD and says there are currently only a handful of hardened kids remaining.

“We’re reducing those numbers drastically too,” he says. “The day strollers too; there’s a programme running with the CCID (Cape Town Central City Improvement District) where children are engaged with, rather than ignored. The big thing is to reduce the amount of money they make from begging, and provincial government is launching a big campaign (to dissuade people from giving money to beggars).”

Hooper’s organisation, which provides a network of services for street children, has also been advocating the extension of programmes that keep kids off the streets during the World Cup school holiday period. “We’ve got the Department of Education to agree, in the more

marginal areas, to extend a holiday programme with food for two weeks.”

### Out of sight, out of mind...

While the city may have good intentions when it comes to dealing with homeless adults and street kids especially, on the ground it’s often a different story. Allegations of abuse, particularly by private security companies employed by improvement districts, continue to surface.

An internal security report from the Woodstock Improvement District (WID) — in The Big Issue’s possession — details a number of incidents from March 15 to 21 this year where “vagrants” are reported as being “removed” from the area. According to the report, over a three-day period more than 30 men and women were “removed” from the WID area, most of them for begging, loitering, drinking in public or sleeping in parks.

Chris Lloyd, Manager for the WID, insists that the contracted security company, Orbis Security, is only enforcing the city’s so-called “nuisance” bylaws and that “removed” does not necessarily mean forcible removal.

“Security will first inform them that they’re doing something illegal, for instance drinking in public...Normally what they will do is confiscate the liquor from them and ask them to vacate the area immediately. That’s basically it. It’s not a question of putting handcuffs on



them and taking them to Khayelitsha and dropping them off in the middle of nowhere. Obviously we can't do that," he says.

However, his claim that WID's security does not physically remove people from the area is at odds with the security log sheet, which repeatedly states: "Officer removed him (male vagrant) out of the area."

Just a few blocks away, in the territory of the Cape Town Central City Improvement District (CCID), a 17-year-old boy, who has been on the street since he was five and now lives in a shelter, claims private security is still carrying out forced removals. He alleges that when he was on the streets security officers from the CCID picked him and his friends up in the middle of the night, put them in a *bakkie* and drove them out to the Cape Flats.

"They dropped us somewhere, I don't know where, maybe Langa, Khayalitsha. We went to the police station; they took us to a shelter. We slept there, ate, had a shower and the next morning we ran away and took the train back to Cape Town. They're wasting their time, because we just come back."

Asked to comment on the allegation, Tasso Evangelinos, Chief Operations Officer of CCID, replied: "If that's the case, if my security has done something illegal, the recipient of this (action) can lay a charge with the police. If the guy is guilty, I can guarantee there'll be a proper investigation into the security officer's actions. I can instruct that a lie detector test is taken, which we regularly do to check they're telling

the truth. If they're not telling the truth and it's a criminal issue, we will arrest them and charge them and they'll be locked up."

He added: "A lot of the street children are criminally linked. We've caught them on a number of occasions, snatching gold chains, dealing drugs, taking drugs, begging aggressively. They're not a very reliable source when it comes to relaying information."

To its credit, the CCID is one of the few improvement districts with its own social development branch, which works in partnership with various shelters and NGOs, such as *Straatwerk*, a faith-based organisation that assists homeless people with job opportunities. A dedicated team of fieldworkers walk the streets of the CBD daily, interacting with street people, finding them accommodation in shelters and following up on any complaints regarding their treatment by security.

The CCID's social development team is also in direct contact with government's 24-hour social service for children, as well as being involved in educating homeless people about their rights and providing sensitivity training to CCID security officers.

### **The thin blue line...**

The City of Cape Town and its improvement districts have made no bones about the fact that they are enforcing the municipal Bylaw Relating to Streets, Public Places and Prevention of Nuisances more strictly in the run-up to

the World Cup. And, with FIFA enforcing its own set of restraints on host cities, security is expected to be tight during the world's largest sporting event.

While many have welcomed the crackdown on harassment by overzealous beggars and unauthorised car guards, who are completely outlawed as part of this legislation, there have been serious concerns that there's a thin (and often blurred line) between enforcing bylaws and criminalising the poor and marginalised.

Wayne Aldridge, Senior Inspector with the Displaced People's Unit (DPU), part of Specialised Law Enforcement Services, argues that the city has invested time and resources into ensuring law enforcement knows which side of the line to stay on.

Aldridge explains that the DPU was established in 2001 and officers are trained by the Department of Social Development on "how to identify social problems on the street and differentiate between the social need and the criminal element". The DPU works hand-in-hand with the Metro police, he adds: "If they come across a social problem they call us. If they come across a bylaw infringement they'll deal with it themselves."

He adds that the DPU has also received sensitivity training for dealing with street people in relation to the bylaws and the Prevention of Illegal Eviction from and Unlawful Occupation of Land (PIE) Act: "It touched a lot on the legal aspects, the legal





implications of dealing with a street person, or any person, in an inhumane way.”

Aldridge says he is all too aware of the bad rap law enforcement officers have when it comes to dealing with homeless adults and children. He concedes that “90% of the complaints 10 years ago were dealt with hard-handedly”, but maintains that there has been a complete turnaround.

Hooper, who has worked in the sector for more than 20 years, backs up this claim and says it’s no longer like the bad old days when apartheid police used to pick up street kids and drop them off in the Karoo. “I believe the DPU works on a human rights basis,” he says.

### Torment in tin town...

But what of the rampant allegations of the “vulnerably accommodated” being picked up off the streets of Cape Town and dumped in Blikkiesdorp so that the scores of tourists descending on the mother city during the World Cup will not have to be faced with the ugly reality of poverty and homelessness?

Blikkiesdorp, or the Symphony Way Temporary Relocation Area (TRA) as it is formally known, was established in 2008 to house 650 people evicted after illegally occupying homes in the N2 Gateway housing project. In the two years of its existence, Blikkiesdorp has become known as a dumping ground for those evicted from unsafe houses, vagrants and victims of xenophobic violence.

In a fenced off area amid the barren dunes of Delft, roughly 1 600 metal structures stand in a grid. Rows and rows of 18m-square units are erected on hard gravel; four metal walls with a

roof, each spray-painted with a number. Some are empty, with no glass where the windows should be and rubbish littering the floor. For every four units there is a freestanding toilet and basin, but on closer inspection it becomes clear that some are unworkable. Opening a toilet door reveals a broken toilet littered with bottles and plastics; fetid water pools in the sand beneath an open water pipe.

Residents Jane Roberts and Badroneesa Morris, members of the Western Cape Anti-

‘No one is forced to stay (in Blikkiesdorp)’  
– Helen Zille

Eviction campaign, say many of the units are overcrowded and there are high levels of unemployment, largely because residents don’t have money for transport to go and seek work.

“It’s like a concentration camp, especially over weekends,” fumes Morris, By 10 o’clock you must be inside otherwise the police and Bambananis (volunteer security patrols) will hit you and kick you. They take us for nothing; they take us for animals.”

Morris and Roberts both allege that people have been forcibly moved to Blikkiesdorp from the streets but say many of them move back. “They’re not free here,” says Morris. “They don’t feel there is a living here for them.”

City spokesperson Kylie Hatton acknowledges that street people from the Sea Point area have been moved to Blikkiesdorp but

she maintains this was of their own free choice.

“There is no wholesale collection of people who may be living on the street and dumping them in Blikkiesdorp,” stresses Hatton. “It’s completely voluntary; we’re constantly inundated with requests from people who want accommodation there. The allegation that this is related to the World Cup is completely untrue.”

Western Cape Premier Helen Zille has also been quick to deny reports of forced removals and says the city has been inundated with requests from people wanting to move to Blikkiesdorp: “No one is forced to stay. It is an informal settlement with full services.”

And some residents are grateful to have a roof over their head, no matter how dire the circumstances. Last year, Iris Davids, a young mother of two, and soft-spoken Roney Thomas, were living with their families under bridges on the R300 road. They say they were moved to Blikkiesdorp by Law Enforcement and the Council and put in one shack, housing eleven people.

They allege that after speaking to The Voice about the cramped living conditions they were evicted on a rainy weekend and dumped on the pavement outside the settlement. Davids explains that the Western Cape Anti-Eviction campaign negotiated with City on their behalf and, after three weeks, the families were moved into individual units.

“I’ve got a roof over my head now and know I can close the door. I can say this is my house. We don’t know how long we’ll stay here but we’re so grateful to have a place of our own,” she says. **TBI**