

Complaints about services give rise to protest in South Africa

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The continued challenge of providing basic services, including water and housing, to all of South Africa's residents, has led to the spread of protests in South Africa's townships.

The demonstrations take place almost 100 days after Jacob Zuma was sworn in as president, following an electoral campaign focused on overcoming poverty. The current economic crisis will present additional challenges to the newly elected ANC government as they attempt to deliver on their election promises, including the improvement of service delivery and a new housing allocation policy.

Despite building 2.8 million new homes since 1994, more than one million families still live in shacks across all South Africa's townships. Protests about the quality of housing have been multiplying and, in at least two cases, confrontation with the police has turned violent. On Tuesday 21 July police fired rubber bullets at demonstrators in Thokoza township outside Johannesburg, after police cars were stoned and buildings were burned.

Over the last few days, more than 100 protesters have been arrested by the police in Johannesburg, the Western Cape and the north-eastern region of Mpumalanga. According to some reports, demonstrators burned foreign-owned shops in Mpumalanga and the police had to protect foreigners. Other episodes of violence have taken place recently in the country, showing the discontent of people in the poorest areas.

According to Municipal IQ, the organisation in charge of monitoring municipal services, demonstrations related to poor public services have increased in 2009. 24 major protests have been organised so far this year, compared to 27 in the whole of 2008. "The ANC put service delivery of local government at the centre stage," ANC spokesman Ishmael Mnisi claimed, adding that "we need to directly fix the issues at hand, not the symptoms of the problem." Referring to the protests, President Zuma acknowledged service delivery problems and promised to help South African townships by addressing public grievances; yet he strongly condemned the violence, pointing out that "there can be no justification for violence, looting and destruction of property or attacks on foreign nationals residing in our country."

With South Africa pushed into its first economic recession since the ending of apartheid rule in 1994 by the global economic crisis, it is a challenge for President Zuma to turn his campaign's priority, the fight against poverty, into reality.