

# Sexwale fails to impress cynical residents

**Monako Dibetle**

Residents of Diepsloot were less than starry-eyed this week after a visit by Human Settlements Minister Tokyo Sexwale. Diepsloot is one of many areas where service delivery failures have provoked incensed community members to take to the streets in protest.

Sexwale confidently made his way through the smelly sludge in narrow alleyways in Diepsloot on Monday.

Attended mostly by members of his department, local councillors and journalists, he said government officials need to expose themselves to the conditions in which poor

people live. "I am here today on a listening campaign," he said. "I want to know, who are you, what are you doing here, what do you want and what made you come here?"

He was embarking on a "journey" to assure residents that the government wants to put an end to informal settlements, he said.

Most residents felt that it was just another political campaign.

Even the minister's three-hour nap in one of Diepsloot's cold, windowless shacks failed to impress residents.

"I don't buy into this publicity stunt," said Tshediso Kesi (30), a shack dweller who has lived in

Diepsloot since 2000. Kesi said Sexwale's visit and sleeping in a shack was a joke and very patronising.

"Look, the minister only wanted to calm us down after the protest. He is not the first top politician to visit Diepsloot and he is not the last. He thinks sleeping in a shack makes a difference ... we have been sleeping in them for years."

Thamaga Masekoameng (24), who is unemployed, thought the minister sounded genuine and that his visit showed that he is concerned. But "that's how all politicians operate", he said. "We have heard it all before and unfortunately we will continue hearing these empty promises."

Masekoameng and his mother, Mmamoshibudi, settled in their one-room shack in the mid-1990s and said they have applied for RDP housing more than five times.

Said Masekoameng: "When we asked Tokyo about houses, he did not give us a clear answer ... he only gave us a lecture on government budgets and history. He only came here to console us."

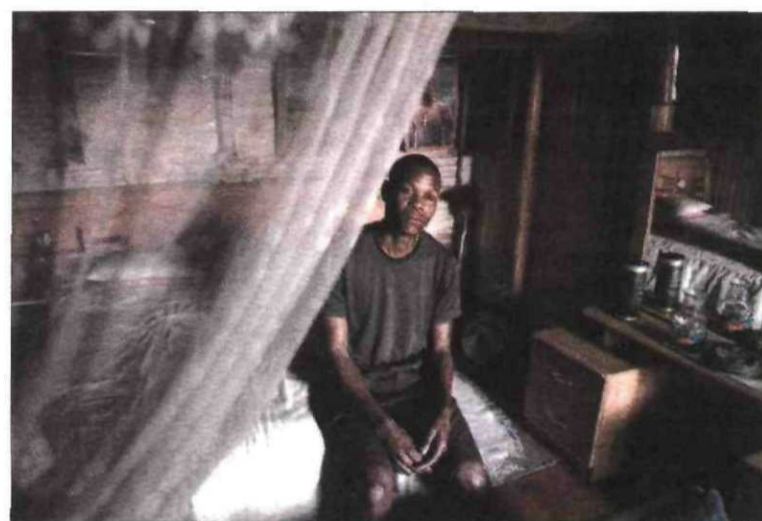
"He is fooling us ... there's no way that this matter is going to be solved now. We'll just wait for the next elections."

Political analysts and service delivery experts agree with Diepsloot residents.

"Indeed, it was a PR campaign," said Dr Ubesh Pillay, a service delivery specialist at the Human Sciences Research Council.

"Since communities feel that conventional mechanisms of dealing with local government have failed, some form of higher-level intervention is necessary."

Pillay said that after Sexwale's visit to Diepsloot and President Jacob



**Tshediso Kesi does not think Minister Tokyo Sexwale's visit will make a difference.** Photo: Paul Botes

Zuma's to Balfour, residents will expect follow-through. Without that, perceptions will strengthen that the visits are no more than PR exercises.

Pillay said building houses in Diepsloot and other informal settlements is not a solution.

"Many communities would like their informal dwellings and shacks upgraded."

"In some cases residents prefer this

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to formal housing, as an informal settlement may be closer to economic opportunities."

To deal effectively with poor service delivery, a short-term improvement plan in the most affected areas is necessary in addition to more ambitious national goals.

Aubrey Matshiqi, an independent political observer, said the PR aspect of Sexwale's visit does not mean the government is unconcerned about the problems poor people were facing.

"The visit shows that the minister cares – but it should not suggest that the residents' problems will be solved any time soon," he said.

Sexwale and his team will visit other townships across the country where there have been reports of poor service delivery, including the N2 Gateway in Cape Town and some townships in the Buffalo City, Mangaung and Durban areas.