

Catholic anger at 'blunder'

By MSINDISI FENGU

EASTERN Cape Health Department MEC Sicelo Gqobana has blamed Nestlé for the arrest of three Roman Catholic Church priests, who were selling baby formula meant to be distributed free for underprivileged children.

The Eastern Cape Roman Catholic Church's vicar-general Father Heinrich Schöder has demanded an apology from the department for the arrest of his fellow priests after it was revealed they had in fact bought the formula from Nestlé.

Schöder said the department had committed a "blunder" driven by "uninformed" allegations.

The trio from Queenstown, Dutywa and Cofimvaba were arrested last week after a joint sting operation between police and health officials following a tip-off.

Police and health officials had acted on allegations that the clergymen had sold thousands of tins of baby formula which were destined for health institutions to hand over

Health MEC blames Nestlé for baby formula arrests

to needy communities "free of charge".

The arrests sparked an uproar and Nestlé has been found at the centre of the controversy.

An outraged Schöder lambasted the department after the arrests of Edward Tsatsaert, 67, from Queenstown; Frines Karl from Cofimvaba, 78, and another priest from Dutywa, whose details have not yet been made public.

Tsatsaert was released on R5 000 bail on Tuesday. Police said Karl's case was dismissed due to a lack of evidence.

Schöder said after buying the baby formula from the company they sold it to needy communities.

"The church jumped in where the department failed to provide for poor communities. We demand an apology from the department for wrongful arrest."

Gqobana said his department had met with Nestlé and "instructed" the firm to apologise because of the "confusion" they had created.

Gqobana maintained that his department had acted because the baby formula was a State product. "We jumped following a whistleblower that the baby formula from our health institutions was being sold at these churches."

He said officials had indeed found that the same baby formula was provided by Nestlé to health institutions.

"Under normal circumstances that baby formula is not sold randomly. It is intended for assessed kids and not for adults. A flood of people including police officers were buying from those churches. That baby formula is different to the one sold at shops."

Gqobana said discussions were

held with Nestlé on Wednesday and Thursday to clarify the problem.

He said they had instructed police not to proceed with the operation until clarity was received from Nestlé.

The joint operation had resulted in loads of baby formula being confiscated.

- On Tuesday, a truckload on its way to Cofimvaba was stopped and baby formula worth close to R91 000 was confiscated;

- Last Thursday, 1 400 tins were confiscated in Queenstown; and

- More than 1 600 tins of baby formula were found in Dutywa.

Nestlé spokesperson Ravi Pillay said they were "extremely concerned" about the situation and "actively engaging" with authorities "to fully understand" what was happening. — msindisif@dispatch.co.za