

Deputy minister vows to tackle asbestos dust

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By Vusumuzi ka Nzapheza

The people of Kgalagadi district in the Northern Cape are living under a blanket of asbestos-filled dust blown from disused mine dumps.

This was the scene that shocked the Deputy Minister of Environmental Affairs, Rejoice Mabudafhasi, when she visited the area this week.

Many people living in the 19 communities in the area had already been diagnosed with asbestos-related diseases such as asbestosis, lung cancer and mesothelioma, which have no known cure once a person inhales the asbestos fibres, Mabudafhasi said.

"No remedial work has been done to address the problem and it is poised to worsen if nothing is done sooner," she said.

Asbestos dust settled on many homes, spreading to household items, including cooking utensils, while poverty made it difficult for the residents to fight the diseases, the deputy minister added.

"Although compensation agencies and support structures had been established, they only benefited former mining employees and their descendants. Residents who are affected but who have no historical links to the companies are not receiving assistance to seek compensation," she said.

The deputy minister said plans to counter environmental degradation caused by asbestos would be pursued with NGOs, businesses and the provincial government.

"Addressing the problem will require huge resources and the Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism is exploring various avenues to solicit both capital and human resources to assist the province with the rehabilitation of the environment," she said.

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