

Environmental Affairs and Tourism Deputy Minister, Ms Rejoice Mabudafhasi, Embarked on a Road-Show in Kgalagadi District

20 February 2007

Media Statement

ENVIRONMENTAL AFFAIRS AND TOURISM DEPUTY MINISTER, MS REJOICE MABUDAFHASI, EMBARKED ON A ROAD-SHOW IN K GALAGADI DISTRICT, NORTHERN CAPE AND WAS GREETED BY DISTURBING NEWS OF COMMUNITIES LIVING UNDER A BLANKET OF ASBESTOS DUST ARISING FROM THE UNREHABILITATED MINES DUMPS AND CAUSING UNPRECEDENTED DISEASES TO THE LOCALS.

TUESDAY, 20 FEBRUARY 2007: Polluted asbestos-filled dust blown by wind to communities in the vicinity of the mine dumps in Kgalagadi District, Northern Cape Province, is wreaking havoc and leaving a trail of fast spreading sufferings to poverty-stricken communities. No remedial work has been done to address the problem and the problem is poised to worsen if nothing is done sooner.

Many people have already been diagnosed with asbestos-related diseases such as asbestosis, lung cancer and mesothelioma which attack the residents through inhalation of asbestos fibres and there is no known scientific cure for these diseases. The findings of the survey indicate that nineteen (19) communities are affected.

The virtually indestructible asbestos fibres can break into thousands of microscopic particles, get released into the atmosphere and thereafter form part of the polluted air people breathe daily. Aided by people's movements, the asbestos fibres can spread up to 100 km radius from the source. Asbestos can be found in building materials used for schools, churches, public offices, homes and brake linings of cars and trucks. The crumbling of roofs and bricks made of asbestos further exacerbate the problem as more fibres are released into the air. The entire Kgalagadi District is virtually covered in asbestos since asbestos is found in public facilities such as clinics, churches, police stations, tribal offices, sports fields, schools and CBDs.

Learners at Gamopedi Schools now have to grapple with fighting asbestos induced diseases, instead of concentrating on their studies. The Vergenoeg Tower community is also subjected to the same challenge of fighting off the ailments. The unabated spread of the diseases has recently claimed the life of a young researcher from a local community. Pessimism has engulfed the residents as the worst is feared in the future if help doesn't come urgently. The low socio-economic status of the communities makes it impossible for residents to fight the diseases since residents have no money to access quality medicines. The asbestos dust covers many homes and even spread to household items, including cooking utensils.

Although compensation agencies and support structures have been established, their services mainly benefit former employees and their descendants. Residents without historical links with former asbestos mining companies, but are affected aren't receiving assistance to seek compensation.

Commenting at a road-show on Monday the 19th February 2007 Deputy Minister Rejoice Mabudafhasi said, "Plans to counter environmental degradation caused by asbestos fibres will be vigorously pursued by mobilizing NGOs, business and the provincial government to help the affected residents. Addressing the problem would require huge resources and the Dept. of Environmental Affairs and Tourism is exploring various avenues to solicit both capital and human resources to assist provinces to initiate rehabilitations. Furthermore, I would like to appeal to the private sector to come on board to contribute to the collective efforts to rehabilitate the mines and initiate a program to reduce the concentration of asbestos fibres in the atmosphere. Projects involving public private partnerships always deliver impressive results and I would like to see a similar collaboration environmentally changing the lives of Kgalagadi people".

Asbestos mining began in the 1880s and South Africa contributed 97% of the world blue asbestos production. Cape Plc (via Cape Blue), Merencor and Griqualand Exploratory and Finance Company (GEFCO) were the main owners of asbestos producing mines. The closure of the manually operated mines (7), which were left open when the operations were closed, occurred in 1990.

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