

Precious and the asbestos dumps



Penge started out as a short stopover for Kevin Davie while on a cycling trip. But he was drawn back by the inhabitants living amid poisonous dust.

The town of Penge, on the banks of the Olifants River in Limpopo, was on my cycling route. I knew that asbestos had been mined there in the past and so read up about it. My impression was that it had not been fully rehabilitated and was unfit for human habitation.

[Living in an asbestos dump](#)

Business editor Kevin Davie stumbled across a lethal asbestos dump of a town while cycling, where people live with the toxic substance. He talks us through the photos of the investigation that followed.

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An attempt to move people from the nearby village of Segorong to Penge a few years back, for instance, had been blocked because of pollution in Penge.

Asbestos pollution, as is widely known, is extremely toxic. Just breathing this dust can be enough over the longer term to produce asbestosis, a chronic inflammatory lung disease, which can result in lung cancer or mesothelioma, cancer of the protective lining that covers the organs of the body.

Penge is a local version of Chernobyl, a place to visit at your peril.

I was nearing the town just as night fell. I knew that there was no tourist accommodation, but asked a group of women in Segorong if there was a place for me to sleep. One had a room.

Dispatched by her mother to help was Precious, a 14-year-old girl, and two friends. They showed me where the shop was, let me use their telephone to make a call (there is no Vodacom signal, only MTN), which included demonstrating exactly how the phone needed to be held (there is a single tower so you have to stand still when you speak while the phone is angled in a certain way).

Precious had unemployed parents, but all the confidence of any Johannesburg child who had come through the best schools. She had similar aspirations too, telling me she wanted to be a doctor.

The mine dominating the landscape around Segorong is not an asbestos one, but andulasite, which has a number of industrial uses.

If andulasite was hazardous to health, I reasoned, I would know about it. I cycled on.

The Future of Penge

A few months later I was back in Penge, this time with colleague Paul Botes. Penge was one of the country's oldest asbestos mines. Operations began in 1910 and ceased in 1992 when demand for asbestos finally ended in the face of growing awareness of its health hazards.

A comprehensive report, *The Future of Penge*, by the Centre for Sustainability in Mining and Industry at the University of the Witwatersrand drew this conclusion: "It is strongly recommended that the whole of the Penge site, including the former mining village and the mine dumps, be closed to human habitation."

The report notes that with the assistance of the state, the truth about the negative effects of asbestos on health were suppressed in the 1960s. It was only in the 1980s that researchers highlighted this link in South Africa. This was just down the road from Penge at Mafefe. Asbestos mining continued in South Africa until 2001, when operations ceased at the Msauli mine in Mpumalanga.

Once the Penge mine closed, its workers remained behind. Many of them moved into the abandoned properties. Other properties have been vandalised over the years and about half the buildings have been stripped for building materials.

Botes and I did not know where to start looking but followed a track that ended at a tall silo and a group of ruined buildings. We drove down to the Olifants River and took a ride in the manually operated cable cars used to ferry passengers across the river at the cost of R6 a return trip.

We visited a small cemetery. Some of the graves had noticeably young occupants, but in a country ravaged by HIV and decreasing life expectancy, this did not reveal much.

Back at Penge we stopped in the main street to ask where the mine was. Workers had been repairing a storm-water pipe and left a deep hole with two large mounds of earth. Except the earth was not earth, but asbestos.

A passer-by directed us to Sam Morei, an asbestosis sufferer, who offered to show us around.

We took a short drive, less than one kilometre, to more abandoned buildings and another silo. This was the main mine. The silo we had visited earlier was another shaft used by the mine.

Less than a kilometre further we found old diggings, some of which dated back to the earliest days of the mine. One unprotected shaft went straight into the earth for about six metres. Morei pointed to fresh footprints leading into the shaft. Someone was underground at that very moment, taking out the steel tracks previously used to bring out the asbestos.

We asked Morei where the asbestos was. He pointed to a rock next to him with an asbestos seam in it. Crumbling it into dust, he told how dangerous the stuff was.

There were exposed asbestos dumps everywhere: a long wall nearby had been built of asbestos. Further away, a trench had been dug, which exposed 30 or 40 metres of the white-

grey stuff. Apparently it was the work of an asbestosis sufferer who, the previous year, had dug up a piece of cable.

Outside the buildings that had served as mine headquarters was a chunk of asbestos, displayed in the way you would show a meteorite.

A protracted court battle, fought by asbestosis sufferers, resulted in a trust fund being set up to pay out victims. Morei said he received R39 480 — the first of three expected payments.

We asked to meet more asbestosis sufferers.

Petrus Malope dangled a cigarette from his mouth as he told us that he had not yet applied for compensation because he was concerned that “sharks”—middlemen who take up to 75% of the payout for themselves—end up getting most of the money.

I asked Malope what the community wanted. He said that before the mine had closed, some rehabilitation had been done, but this was only in the high-profile areas. The community, which numbers about 3 000 according to the Wits study, wanted the place cleaned up. Malope offered to show us Weltevreden mine, about 20km away on a Jeep track, where no rehabilitation had been undertaken. We drove along the mountain track to a beautiful, remote part of the country, a few kilometres south of the Olifants.

Weltevreden was a large mine that obviously had been worked for a long time. All that remains are massive uncovered asbestos dumps.

Malope pointed to abandoned mine accommodation about 100m away where the workers had lived. He recalled how the wind would blow the toxic asbestos fibres directly towards the buildings.

On this day there was a gentle breeze in the opposite direction, depositing a sprinkling of dust on my shoes.

Malope told me he had visited the abandoned site a few years back with a companion. On approaching the empty swimming pool they had noticed a large pipe, about 15cm thick, going towards the pool. They followed the pipe around a building, inspecting it closely. It started to vibrate. They had not yet found the end of the pipe, but turned to retrace their footsteps. Coming back around the corner they saw that it was not a pipe at all but a very long snake, which had reared up and was looking at them.

“We had a car parked nearby but we ran past it,” said Malope. “We ran and ran and ran.”

Back in the city

Back in Jo’burg I checked out the Weltevreden mine on Google. It has another claim to infamy. On October 4 1989 Eugene de Kock and colleagues assassinated Johannes Mabotha at this spot.

De Kock told the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that he had instructed members of his group and Mabotha to walk to the mine shaft. Here there were explosives equivalent to six land mines.

De Kock shot Mabotha twice in the heart from two metres. Mabotha's body was placed over the explosives, which were detonated. The next morning an inspection showed no traces of the body.

Return to Penge

In Penge we visited the hospital, which had been downgraded to a clinic. We did not go inside but the grounds had piles of refuse waiting to be picked up. The clinic, the Wits report says, has warnings posted on its walls about diarrhoea, HIV/Aids and tuberculosis, but does not mention the hazards of asbestos.

The same could be said for the whole area. Asbestos lies around uncovered, being picked up by wind and washed around by rain, but there are no warnings anywhere to residents or visitors about this danger.

We met Phillip Magabe, who worked on the Penge mine until it closed in 1992. The 67-year-old showed us a certificate from the department of health, confirming he had asbestosis.

We spoke to Magabe at his home, just several hundred metres from where we had seen the unrehabilitated mines earlier that morning.

He said he had received two payments and was waiting for one more to come. He got R10 000 the first time and a "shark" got R10 000 as well.

The second time he received R10 000. He was uncertain how much the "shark" got.

Some of the miners we spoke to said that respirators had been made available to workers from the late 1980s but that they were seldom used because it was too hot underground to wear them.

Magabe, who said he had worked at three mines in the area—Penge, Weltevreden and Kromellenboog—said he had never had the option of using a ventilator in his working career.

"I never used safety. I was never offered safety."

Earlier we had spoken to a policeman near the chunk of asbestos given pride of place in the centre of the town. We told him we were interviewing asbestosis sufferers.

"Ah, the lucky ones," he said, smiling.

We asked whether politicians ever visited Penge. There had been visitors and delegations from time to time, even a commitment to surveying the area, but nearly 30 years after the Penge mine closed, it has yet to be properly cleaned up.

In the late afternoon we met Morei again, on his way to work. He is the night watchman at the new cemetery. This used to be the whites-only cemetery during apartheid. It has been expanded in size but is home to only about 60 graves.

The cemetery is protected by a perimeter of concrete fencing about 2.5m high with a roll of barbed wire on the top. You would battle to break into this cemetery, but then again, admission can come from doing no more than breathing the air.

The cemetery has modern finishes but no electricity. The only light Morei had was on his cellphone.

He told Botes that he had not been paid for 14 months but did not want to quit in case the site was vandalised and he was held responsible. Penge is administered from Burgersfort by the Greater Tubatse municipality.

Jermina Kaka, spokesperson for the municipality, looked into Morei's case. She said he had never been employed by the municipality and that it did not have the position of night watchman at the cemetery on its books.

Claims for compensation

Back in Jo'burg I arranged to meet Brian Gibson and Tina da Cruz of the Kgalagadi Relief Trust (KRT) and the Asbestos Relief Trust (ART) respectively, at their offices in Parktown. The trusts were set up following litigation by asbestosis sufferers.

A settlement was reached in March 2003 when ART got a total of R468-million from principals Gefco, Gencor and Msauli. In 2006 Becon, a Swiss company, voluntarily set up the KRT.

By the end of 2009 ART and KRT had received 15 297 claims and had paid out R259-million to 4 114 successful claimants, an average of R63 000 a claimant.

Gibson and Da Cruz confirmed what the Penge policeman had said. Some claimants who test negative are very unhappy about the diagnosis and demand to be retested, so important is the financial compensation to them.

Asbestosis sufferers who were occupationally exposed to asbestos are also able to petition the state for compensation.

This can be both a lengthy process and result in middlemen, who sign up clients for a small fee, getting a large chunk of successful claims.

The mandates of the ART/KRT trusts are more or less limited to finding and paying out victims who were in the employ of these companies. They also have a limited role to sponsor social projects in the affected areas.

Large scale problem

And this is where the scale of the problem arises. There are about 100 villages in four areas of the country, home to between 50 000 and 100 000 people, which have so-called secondary effects, meaning that there is asbestos pollution of one sort or another in the villages. Four provinces—North West, Limpopo, Northern Cape and Mpumalanga—are affected.

The pollution in some of these villages is particularly acute as mining was on an informal and labour-intensive basis rather than using shafts as some of the formal mines did. People harvested asbestos and transported it to the mines where it was sold.

The secondary pollution includes dumps that have not been rehabilitated, buildings that contain exposed asbestos, facilities such as schools and playing fields built on polluted

ground and, in an area of the Northern Cape, an extensive road network of about 300km built using asbestos.

Rob Jones, an expert in asbestos pollution, completed a detailed survey of some of these areas for the government in 2006.

He recommended that the areas should be rehabilitated or the residents moved to alternative, safe accommodation. He was subsequently tasked with estimating the total cost of rehabilitation. Costs have not yet been publicised but some insiders believe it could be as much as R3-billion.

This is a scary amount of money, but if spread over a 10-year period on a prioritised basis it would break down to about R300-million a year. It would cost more to uproot and move the communities, which are constitutionally entitled to live in an environment that is not hazardous to health.

Jones confirmed in an email that Penge is an environmental hazard. He said he was unable to supply details of its current status as this was confidential until released by government.

Government's point man on this issue is Stranton Narain, from the department of environmental affairs. He said the issue is covered by a raft of legislation, including the Constitution, the National Environmental Management Act (Nema) and the Regulations for the Prohibition of Use, Manufacturing, Import and Export of Asbestos and Asbestos Containing Materials, which was promulgated in March 2008.

"In line with this legislation, DEA [department of environmental affairs] is currently in the process of developing a remediation plan and funding model for secondary asbestos-contaminated areas in the country. This study is not yet complete," said Narain.

I suggested to him in a subsequent mail that government was criminally negligent in taking so long to address the issue. He did not reply.

The Human Rights Commission's Vincent Moaga said the HRC had investigated two cases in which asbestos is involved, but these are not to do with people living in areas contaminated by asbestos. The HRC has not undertaken any formal inquiry into the rights of people living in areas polluted by asbestos.

Moaga invited me to lay a formal complaint with the HRC. I will do this.

I told Jones that I had visited Penge.

He said that the soccer field where we had watched kids kick a ball was polluted. He also offered information I had not requested: "Environmental asbestos contamination is a significant environmental health hazard in Penge and Segorong," his email said.

My cycling trip had been a long one and I had met many people as I made my way down the Drakensberg.

I did not think that Precious would feature in any story of mine and did not even ask her for her surname. But there was something in her quiet confidence and self-assuredness,

notwithstanding the relative poverty of her surroundings, that made her easily the most impressive person I met on my trip.

I read and re-read Jones's mail. Asbestos mining stopped here in 1992. Precious was born three years later, in 1995. In 2010 she lives in an asbestos dum