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Hospital horror after warnings were ignored

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FEAR, frustration and shock gripped staff, patients and visitors at Charlotte Maxeke Academic Hospital in Joburg after a section of the roof collapsed, leaving five people injured.

So serious was the collapse that Health Minister Dr Aaron Motsoaledi, Gauteng Premier David Makhura and Health MEC Gwen Ramokgopa braved the torrential rain that had flooded most parts of the city and rushed to the hospital.

Amid the chaos of trying to move to a safer area and also trying to help those trapped beneath the rubble, a man was heard asking security personnel what would happen as his father was due for an operation. Hospital staff could only ask him to move towards the casualty area, where people were standing with anxious looks on their faces and being directed by the nursing staff.

Allegations are that maintenance workers were on the roof repairing leaks when it suddenly collapsed.

The search efforts began in the rain around 3pm. Search and rescue teams brought in sniffer dogs to check underneath the rubble for any trapped people.

Heavy machinery, including steel reinforcers and grinders, were wheeled into the disaster area, and the rubble was estimated to have been the size of a tipper truckload.

Insiders reported there was genuine fear among those involved that people would be found dead – an eventuality that government officials did not want to deal with.

Infrastructure Development MEC Jacob Mamabolo said the department would be taking action against the contractors because they believed that negligence was partly to blame.

“There is an option to blacklist construction companies, because from what we can see, there might have been negligence here. And if there are options for

a criminal lawsuit, then we will pursue those as well.”

Mamabolo added that the construction company, Thanzanani Trading Enterprises, were told to stop with all work and be removed from the site.

Ramokgopa emphasised that the affected area of the hospital, the entrance, was inaccessible to the public, with signage to direct the users to other entrances. Hospital functions would not be disrupted, she said.

Makhura used the tragedy as an opportunity to present a united government front, with him relaying that all layers of government – local, provincial and national – had been working together to ensure that the disaster was dealt with adequately.

Last night, activity in and around the the disaster area was dying down, with the emergency personnel packing up their equipment. Clean-up operations were set to continue today.

The hospital's infrastructure had been a point of contention, with a report released almost a year ago saying parts of the building were in need of urgent repairs.

The DA's Gauteng health spokesperson Jack Bloom said staff at the hospital had warned in the past of the leaking roofs and other structural problems in the building.

“The entire hospital must be urgently assessed to ensure it is safe,” Bloom said.

Last year, Bloom had said he was worried that the hospital building would collapse because of years of poor maintenance.

In addition to that, a 2012 report on the state of the hospital pointed out the building's shortcomings. It cautioned about the X-ray department, saying it should be evacuated as it could collapse. The report also identified structural defects on the fifth floor of the building and recommended that urgent repairs costing R50 million be carried out.

However, Bloom said the province's chief engineer, Tshepo Matekane, had said that was not necessary.

One of the hospital's shop stewards said staff had been warning hospital management since October.

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