

Another child dies in a pit latrine

A five-year-old girl has perished in the Eastern Cape, bringing school infrastructure into focus

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Her name is Viwe Jali and she was five years old. On Monday, Viwe fell into a pit latrine at her school, Luna Primary School in Bizana, in the Eastern Cape, and drowned.

At first, nobody knew what had happened to the little girl. Her family and residents gathered and began searching until her body was found on Tuesday, a day after she had died.

Monday had begun like any other day, with Viwe being driven to school along with her schoolmates in the scholar transport. But at the end of the school day, shortly after noon, as the children were making their way back to the vehicle, the five-year-old was not among them.

“Among all the children, Viwe wasn’t there,” said Nomveliso*, a Bizana resident familiar with the incident.

The driver searched the school and couldn’t find Viwe. He continued with his drop-offs, finally stopping at the young girl’s home to inform her parents that she was missing.

The family started a manhunt for Viwe. “The whole village was looking until the morning. Some people slept at the school, hoping the child might come back during the night, but it didn’t happen,” said Nomveliso.

The police arrived in the morning with search dogs. The dogs would eventually latch on to Viwe’s scent, close to where much of the search had been focused the previous night. Her little body was found at the bottom of one of the school’s pit latrines.

“The family is quite distraught about this, as anyone can imagine,” said Nomveliso.

A meeting between the department of basic education, the school and residents led to an agreement not to discuss the incident until the details had been confirmed.

“It seems she fell into the toilet and nobody knew where the child was until the community got



Unsafe: In 2014 Michael Komape drowned in a pit latrine and died, sparking a nationwide call for safer school infrastructure. On Monday, Viwe Jali suffered the same fate. Photo: Alet Pretorius/Gallo Images/Foto24

together and started looking. We got the news only last night and it is something that seems to have happened on Tuesday,” basic education spokesperson Elijah Mhlanga said in an interview with Talk Radio 702.

Mhlanga admitted that the structure of the pit latrine at the school is “not a good one”. He said that children in Viwe’s grade, Grade R, are not allowed to walk near the toilets by themselves. However, residents contradicted Mhlanga, saying the pit latrines were in a good condition.

The school remains open so that pupils can receive counselling after Viwe’s death.

Another resident, whose children also attend Luna Primary school, found it incredible that nobody had heard a child who was trapped in the pit latrine. There is a vegetable garden next to the latrine and people regularly tend to the crops, within earshot, she argued.

More information on the youngster and her death has not yet been released, but a police investigation is under way, the basic education department has confirmed.

Viwe’s death comes at a time when Basic Education Minister Angie Motshekga faces increasing

pressure to fix school infrastructure.

More than 9 000 schools across South Africa have only pit latrines for toilets, according to the department of basic education’s 2016 statistics.

A further 171 schools have no water, 569 have no electricity and 68 operate without any toilets at all.

Last year, Michael Komape dominated the national conscience after his family’s civil lawsuit began at the high court in Limpopo. Komape was also just five years old. He died in 2014 after falling into a pit latrine at his school, Mahlodumela Primary School, near Polokwane. He drowned in faeces.

During the court case, the provincial and national education departments came under scrutiny for how his death was treated. In court, it was revealed that the provincial education department had planned a pauper’s burial for the child after

learning that his grieving family did not have the money for a funeral.

Advocacy group Equal Education has now gone to court to apply pressure on Motshekga and her department to act swiftly to fix the standards and norms they had adopted for school infrastructure in 2013.

The department had set a deadline to replace all unsafe and inappropriately built schools by November 2016. The deadline passed, but the department did not fulfil its promise.

The case is being heard at the Bisho high court, in the Eastern Cape, where it entered the second day of hearings on Thursday.

On Thursday morning, acting Judge Nomawabo Mzizi asked whether Motshekga had not behaved irrationally by ignoring the threats learners face because of poor infrastructure in schools. Advocate Chris Erasmus, representing the state, said that temporary containers can be provided to learners whose classrooms are broken. But, he said, this is not available for entire schools.

Motshekga said in a statement that Viwe had died in an “undignified manner” that she found

“incredibly disturbing”. “I cannot begin to know the trauma the parents are experiencing. It is truly a tragic incident and my sympathies are with them,” she said.

“To know that as a sector we have not been able to address these infrastructure issues fast enough, for a number of reasons, breaks my heart. When a tragedy like this occurs, it makes us more resolute of the continued need for the Accelerated School Infrastructure initiative so that we can continue to fast-track these schools that are in desperate need of infrastructure and make them safe havens for our children,” Motshekga said.

She said that the Eastern Cape had already exhausted its maintenance budget for the year. Budget cuts were among the reasons why improvement of school infrastructure has been slow with a further R3.5-billion expected to be cut from the infrastructure initiative in the next three years, said Motshekga.

Outside the Bisho high court on Wednesday, pupils gathered with an effigy of Motshekga, and listed all the promises that have been broken by her department. The state is arguing that Motshekga and her department work with other government departments, such as public works, to fix school infrastructure and are not solely responsible.

On the other side of the province, preparations will soon be made for little Viwe’s funeral.

Bizana is the birthplace of Winnie Madikizela-Mandela and Oliver Tambo.

Another five-year-old schoolchild was killed on Thursday — “electrocuted to death” at Hamutsha Primary School, in the Makhado municipality of the Vhembe district, according to a statement from the Limpopo department of education.

Spokesperson Sam Makondo confirmed that the death had happened at school but said he was unable to provide any further details as the department was waiting for a report from the district.

In its statement, the department said eight social workers had been sent to the school to counsel the family, pupils and teachers. “Investigations will also ensue to understand fully the circumstances that led to this tragic incident.”

*Not her real name