

Civitas uninhabitable for workers, says PSA

Association taking on Health Department for allowing employees to operate in appalling conditions

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THE Public Servants Association (PSA) will be taking the Department of Health to task for violating the Occupational Health and Safety Act by letting employees work in an uninhabitable building.

It has accused the department of continually failing to address the poor and appalling working conditions at the Civitas building in Pretoria.

Deputy general manager of the organisation Tahir Maepa said the poor state of the building had been raised with the department earlier this year.

At the time, it had been found to be a health risk by the National Occupational Safety Association.

According to Maepa, in a communication sent to employees on April 20 by the department's director-general, workers were informed

of emergency repairs and maintenance.

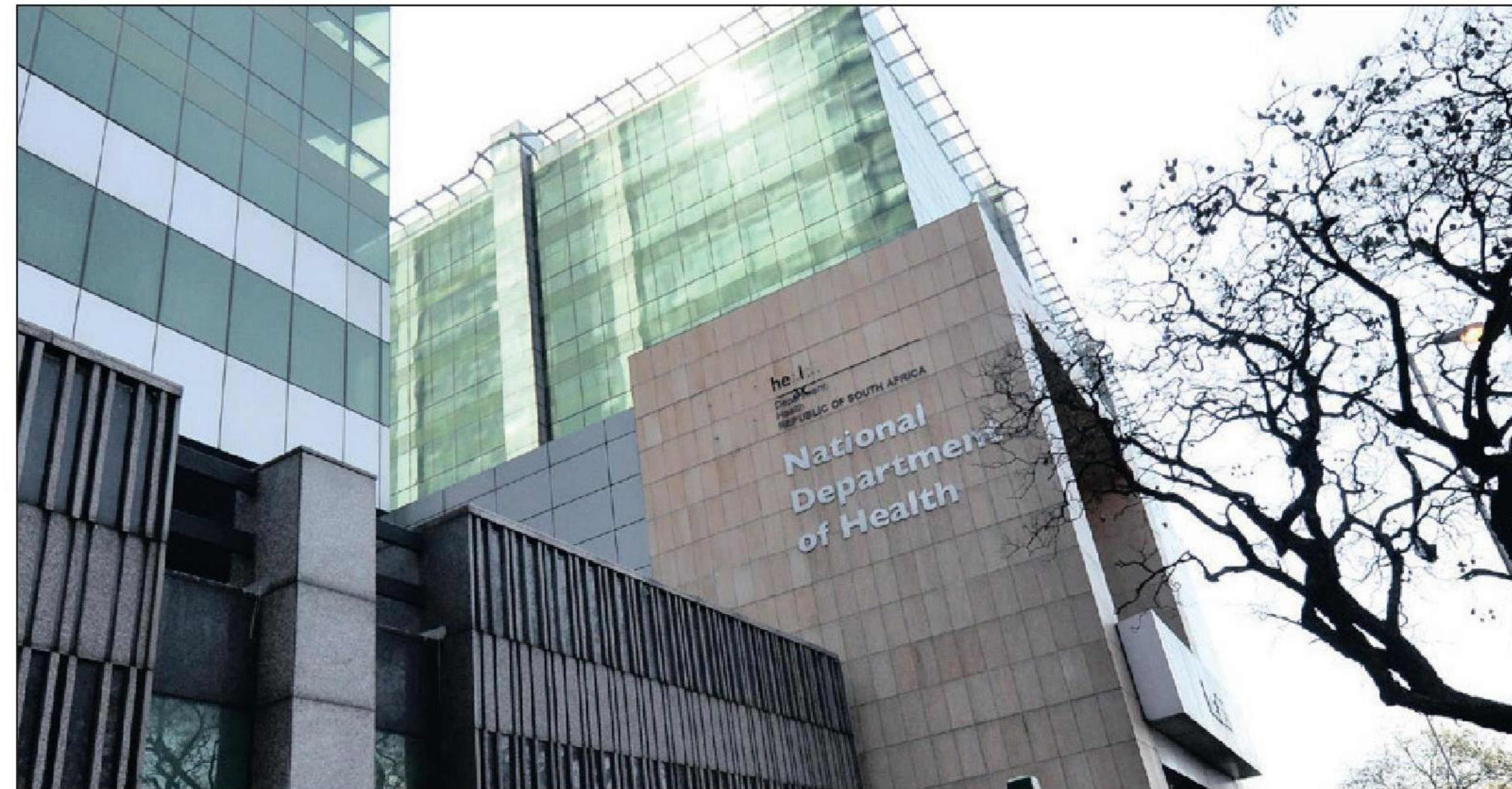
The workers were to only operate from the building until 1pm. However, that had not been the case as work continued as normal, Maepa said.

"It is disturbing, to say the least, that the department has not complied with these commitments; three months later employees are still reporting illnesses related to uncondusive working conditions," the organisation's general manager Ivan Fredericks added.

He said the last resort could be to press charges against the department, which despite acknowledging the issues, had done nothing to address them.

"Employees complained and the Department of Labour raised concerns with the Health Department. Ironically, the department that is tasked with rendering health services to the country, is dismally failing its own employees."

Fredericks said similar issues



were reported at the Addington Hospital in Durban, where staff members complained about the non-functional lifts and interrupted water supply.

He said the department was also dragging its feet on this matter.

Public Servants Association assistant general manager Reuben Maleka said they met Health Minister Dr Aaron Motsoaledi, who also confirmed the validity of the report stating that the building was filled with carbon monoxide and desper-

ately needed work to be done for the safety of employees.

Maleka said that during a follow-up meeting with the director-general they were informed he had been given information of work done on the building.

The Civitas Building in Pretoria, home of the Department of Health, requires major attention to be compliant with the Occupational Health and Safety Act.
PICTURE: OUPA MOKOENA/AFRICAN NEWS AGENCY (ANA)

Maleka said this was false.

"Employees have all but exhausted their leave days and drained their medical aid funds. I was only there for a few hours, but suffered side-effects, including itching throat. It is appalling that employees have to work in such conditions for hours every single day.

"We have repeatedly told officials that we were not negotiating this issue and do not understand why they are dragging their feet with a compliance matter."

Maleka said they even suggested employees be given two weeks' time off or placed in other government buildings in the CBD for the time being.

He said this was necessary as the air quality in the building was not that which any human should be in for extended periods. "The workers are passionate to deliver services to the public, but it's unfortunate their employer is hellbent on ignoring their pleas for adequate and safe working conditions."

Maleka added that they would be meeting with legal representatives to lodge a case against the department following consensus from employees.

Health Department spokesperson Popo Maja said the Department of Public Works had undertaken to do "quick fix" repairs following a comprehensive assessment.

Maja said the assessment had also revealed that issues raised by the unions would require no less than three years to address.

He said that even before the assessment and following a site visit, both parties agreed Civitas was one of the best buildings to accommodate a large number of employees under the same roof.

"In the Civitas Building there are issues of lifts, air-conditioners, carpets for those with allergies and occasional disruptions of water supply.

"The new lifts have been installed. Air-cons have been fixed in most floors."