

The Department of Environmental Affairs building in Suid Street.

### **Government building 'not safe' – Employees evacuated and down tools**

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It is going to be a tight squeeze for officials of the Department of Environmental Affairs who will be housed at the Department of Economic Development, Environment and Tourism (Ledet) headquarters while thorough maintenance is performed at their offices in Suid Street after an earlier evacuation on the grounds of the alleged state of disrepair of the building.

Employees evacuated the building last week amid claims that the structure might collapse at any time due to lack of maintenance. Departmental spokesperson Burckels Napo indicated that they met with the National Education, Health and Allied Workers' Union (Nehawu), Public Servants Association (PSA) and an assessor on Tuesday and it was agreed that officials be accommodated at the Ledet headquarters to continue with their daily duties while they search for a building. He further said they will also engage Department of Public Works, Roads and Infrastructure to help them find suitable accommodation.

It was learnt that the department wanted officials to occupy offices located behind the building they had evacuated but the offer was declined following claims that asbestos had been used in the structure hence they might put their health at risk. Napo confirmed the plan and said maintenance will be done at Environment Affairs but no time frame existed as to when it would be completed.

A source indicated that officials had reported for duty at Ledet's canteen since last Monday, abandoning their crucial office work. A source who conducts business with the department informed that some workers unions are on the verge of organising a march with officials to try and push the department to speed up the process of finding new offices while they do maintenance. Earlier, another source alleged that no one was allowed in the building because they claimed that it was not safe and might collapse at any time. The decision to evacuate the building allegedly followed a recent incident in Johannesburg where a building caught fire and claimed the lives of three firefighters.

Initial information from Napo highlighted that head of department, Solly Kgopong recently assessed the building and concluded that it needed maintenance and that the decision to evacuate the building was also taken by him.

"We are not going to demolish the structure. We are going to perform general maintenance such as repairing broken ceilings, doors and lights among others. Unfortunately we are not sure as to when the maintenance will be completed," Napo explained. He could not confirm the exact age of the building but stated that it was government property 'built many moons ago'.

Nehawu Provincial Secretary Jacob Adams stated that they would put pressure on both Ledet and Public Works to speed up the process. He further said the health and safety policy does not allow workers to perform duties under hazardous conditions, adding that they will monitor the situation closely working together with shop stewards.

PSA Provincial Manager John Teffo could not be reached for comment by the time of going to print and a receptionist at their offices indicated that he was caught up in a meeting.