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HOUSING

Rumours of houses for MK vets persist

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PUBLIC Works Department authorities in Mpumalanga have failed to refute allegations that the department planned to donate 100 houses to Umkhonto we Sizwe military veterans who risked their lives fighting against the apartheid regime.

These veterans make up thousands of armed struggle soldiers who returned to South Africa in 1991, hoping they would be rewarded for their efforts.

In 2017, the Mpumalanga government began a programme of building "decent" houses for the veterans.

The programme was expected to start in 2014, but was delayed by bad planning. So far, a few hundred houses have been handed over, benefiting veterans who spent more than two decades shacking up with relatives and in-laws.

This week, DA councillor in the Steve Tshwete Local Municipality in Middelburg, San-Mari Wait, exposed

plans for the donation of old asbestos structures that were built more than 40 years ago.

"It has come to the DA's attention that the Mpumalanga Department of Public Works is proposing to donate to military veterans an estimated 100 dilapidated asbestos houses, which pose a health risk to the community.

"We understand that these houses were no longer in a good condition to be occupied by anyone, let alone be used as donations.

"The DA ran a petition to oppose this. In a previous Tribunal hearing, the department failed to submit an environmental impact assessment report in support of these existing asbestos houses," said Wait.

She added that the department had a pending offer to give free land to the Steve Tshwete Municipality, which would have enabled them to build proper houses in line with the provincial government's initial plan.

"The department should have also

long removed the asbestos structures and built proper houses.

"In an oversight done by the DA last week, we found that government employees are currently renting those houses, which are not conducive for occupation as they were built with asbestos over 40 years ago."

Wait said the government had been criticised for attempting to build asbestos structures that posed a health hazard to communities.

"It has been proven and reported many times by several institutions that asbestosis is a lung disease that can occur due to asbestos exposure.

"Asbestosis occurs after prolonged exposure to asbestos fibres and will happen over a long period of time.

"The DA will initiate a new tribunal hearing urging the department to donate the land to the Steve Tshwete Local Municipality so that the current asbestos structures can be demolished, and proper houses built for the military veterans.

"We will strive for the improvement and development of Middelburg. If the land was under the ownership of the municipality, it could be rezoned into something that will benefit these residents," Wait said.

The houses that then-premier of Mpumalanga David Mabuza approved before being elected to the national structure of the ANC in December 2017 comprise 50m² with tiled floors, a carport, kitchen unit, stove and 30m² perimeter fence. Other veterans received alternative 60m² houses that excluded a carport, in accordance with their preferences.

In November 2020, the director-general of the Department of Employment and Labour, Thobile Lamati, announced that South Africa had terminated the use of asbestos in view of growing environmental concerns.

"As is the case with many other countries, South Africa still has asbestos-containing materials in many buildings and naturally occurring

asbestos in areas where it was previously mined.

"The legislator has already developed appropriate legislation and policies. However, the prime focus is to manage and control asbestos sources, thus ensuring that the health of workers and communities in general is not adversely affected," said Lamati.

At the time, Lamati's colleague Bulelwa Huna, who is an occupational health and hygiene specialist, added that some 270 million occupational accidents and 160 million occupational diseases were reported annually across the globe, including in South Africa.

Provincial Public Works Department spokesperson Bongani Dhlamini promised to respond to questions sent to him on Tuesday, but had failed to do so by the time of publication.

Steve Tshwete mayor Mhlonishwa Masilela also did not respond to a request for comment on the allegations made by the DA councillor.

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