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REPORT

## Safety violations were flagged days before George building collapse

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TWO days before the deadly George building collapse, which claimed the lives of 34 people, a contractor observed unusual building movements and vibrations on the roof slab.

These were among the findings of investigations into the George building collapse that were revealed by Public Works and Infrastructure Minister Dean Macpherson at a media briefing in George on Saturday.

Cracks were also noted around the base of a column on the ground floor that resembled punch-through patterns. Concerns were also raised about the narrow supporting columns and the large spaces between them.

Macpherson was joined, at the media briefing, by the Council for the Built Environment (CBE) as well as the Engineering Council of South Africa (ECSA), who found a long list of issues behind the tragedy, which claimed 34 lives and left a further 28 people seriously injured last year.

"A subcontractor warned of cracks starting to appear as early as 2023 to the extent that one could see through them while standing in the basement. The site manager instructed these cracks to be patched with a mixture of sand, cement and mortar."

The health and safety agent also resigned during construction, stating that it was "impossible to safeguard the interests of both the client and contractors amid continuous safety violations", the CBE said.

The ECSA further found an engineer guilty for several contraventions, including misrepresentation of academic or professional qualifications and failure to give due regard to and prioritise the health, safety and interests of the public, among others.

The Tribunal has decided to impose the following sanctions, a maximum permissible fine in terms of the Adjustment Fines Act and cancellation of the respondent's registration and the removal of their name from the ECSA register," the regulator said.

Macpherson said the report would also form part of the police investigation.

"If criminal wrongdoing is established, those responsible must be prosecuted without delay. We must ensure that people are held accountable for 34 souls losing their lives. No contractor, engineer, or official should be beyond the reach of the law."

He said the concrete used in the slabs did not meet required specifications.

"Where 19 to 25 megapascal were needed, only 13 megapascal of concrete were delivered. These are not minor oversights. These are systemic failures, failures of planning, oversight, enforcement, and culture. What happened here more than a year ago was a lethal convergence of these failures which resulted in the deaths of 34 people. At every problem, there was a chance to turn back, but because of the weak regulatory environment, there was either no incentive or requirement to do so," Macpherson said.

Police spokesperson Christopher Spies confirmed their inquest investigation was still underway.

"The investigation is at an advanced stage. The case docket will be referred to the National Prosecuting Authority for a decision upon the conclusion of the police probe. The police are not at liberty to divulge any other information at this stage," Spies said.

Over the next three years, the minister said new regulations, legislative amendments, mandatory standards and emergency protocols will be implemented, among others. GOOD party councillor in George, Chantelle Kyd, called for the CBE report, along with all other reports, to be tabled in council.

"We must act decisively to ensure that every municipality, including George, is equipped to strengthen oversight, assess risk, and close the gaps exposed by this collapse."

"The planning department must review the findings, internal processes must be interrogated, and where necessary, corrective actions must be taken. If we fail to act now, we fail every worker who enters a construction site tomorrow," said Kyd.