



Media statement by the Bench Marks Foundation

Largest concentration of uranium on planet threatens Joburg

Johannesburg Tuesday 29 August 2017

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Thanks to over a century of mining, Johannesburg's population is living on the largest concentration of radioactive uranium on the planet, and the National Nuclear Regulator (NNR) should immediately legislate and regulate for this immense health problem.

This was the call made today by the Bench Marks Foundation, following the release of its latest study in Johannesburg. The study, called "Waiting to inhale", is the twelfth in its policy gap series, and examined the household health and wellbeing of four communities impacted by mining in Soweto.

Researchers found many cases of dangerously high Geiger counter readings in mine waste during their study, indicating the presence of uranium and its by product, radon gas.

Bench Marks says that the NNR must enforce exclusion zones and the fencing, securing and signposting of all radioactive tailings waste facilities.

"The NNR should immediately draft concept legislation for tabling in Parliament and into legislation. Such legislation should not include any exclusionary clauses," Bench Marks said.

The study found repeated instances in which tailings waste facilities were unguarded, unfenced and not properly signposted. When there are warning signs, these were often inadequate and misleading.

There was also no attempt to educate communities living near mines about the dangers of derelict, abandoned and ownerless mines. Children, youngsters, and adults were observed swimming during the summer months in the evaporation ponds of tailings waste facilities. They also play on tailings, and use them for quad biking. Hijacked cars are stripped at abandoned tailings, and groups use them as worship sites.

In addition, housing is being developed well within the 500 metre exclusion zone for which legislation provides. It is clear that local authorities are not enforcing this, and that property developers are erecting houses in the exclusion zone with little regard for the potential effect of radioactive material so close by.

Bench Marks says that the Department of Human Settlements and the Johannesburg Council should legislate for and regulate the exclusion of land with elevated levels of radon from being used for housing development.

The researchers found:

- The calculated geographical location of 'townships' near mine waste facilities such as tailings dams, or alternatively the deliberate siting of tailings dams near townships;
- The deliberate location of industrial zones near mine waste facilities;
- The deliberate location of mine waste near rivers and water sources, and lately the allocation of mining licences for catchment areas of important rivers;
- Extensive spillage from mining operations and mine waste facilities into streams, wetlands and rivers; and
- The allocation of mining licences for areas in which a 500m exclusion zone would be impossible, such as near major roads, railway lines, housing, a school and electric power lines, and petroleum and water pipelines.

Among mine workers, health and safety education provided by corporations leaves a lot to be desired, Bench Marks says, and workers in mines operate in radioactive environments without protective gear and no education about radioactivity.

A former employee who worked for a subcontractor on the Mooifontein tailings disclosed in an interview that they were not informed about the presence of uranium, arsenic, lead, cadmium, copper, sulphur, mercury or cyanide in the mine waste they were working on and the protective gear was wholly inadequate.

Negative mine impacts do not end at the fence, because the wind blows mine dust through the fence and into neighbouring communities and farmers.

ENDS

Bench Marks Foundation is an independent non-governmental organisation mandated by churches to monitor the practices of multi-national corporations to

- ensure they respect human rights;
- protect the environment;
- ensure that profit-making is not done at the expense of other interest groups; and
- ensure that those most negatively impacted upon are heard, protected and accommodated within the business plans of the corporations.

The Foundation was launched in 2001 by the Rt Rev Dr Jo Seoka who chairs the organisation and by member churches of the SACC.

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