

Msunduzi residents urged to evacuate as dump fire rages on



By Thami Magubane

Jul 22, 2020 - Msunduzi Municipality residents were again left gasping for clean air after the New England Road landfill site caught fire on Monday, blanketing the city centre and suburbs with thick smoke and fumes.

The fire continued burning yesterday.

Yesterday, the municipality's Environmental Health Unit issued a warning, asking residents with fragile health, and living close to the landfill site, to evacuate their homes.

The last massive fire, which burnt for a week, was in October last year and prompted intervention from the provincial government. At the time, the MEC for Environmental Affairs, Nomusa Dube-Ncube, visited the site and said it left her "horrified and angry".

The municipality has also been warned it would be subjected to a hefty fine for the mismanagement of the site and the release of toxic fumes into the air.

A resident in Sobantu Township, located directly across from the landfill site, said yesterday the smoke had completely blanketed the township and parts of the CBD.

“By midday it was still blurry outside because of the smoke. We received a notice from the city’s Environmental Health Unit that it would take a few days to put out the fire and all those whose health could be seriously affected by the smoke and fumes should move out of the area for the next few days.

“We are wondering where we are supposed to go to because there have been no alternative plans for our accommodation,” said the resident.

Similar concerns were raised by Peter Green of the Scottsville Ratepayers’ Association. He said although there had been many fires at the landfill site, this was the worst in terms of the amount of smoke.

“The smoke has never been so dense, this is the worst that it has been so far. The smoke has blanketed parts of the Scottsville area and the CBD,” he said.

DA councillor Sandy Lyne said since the new administration took over the city just before the start of the lockdown, the landfill site had been better managed and there had not been any fires.

“I suspect that since the change of the security company, the rules have been loosened now. Previously there were heavy restrictions on who could go in and out of the landfill site. I understand that even the waste pickers are back in numbers now.”

A waste picker told The Mercury: “There is still chaos and violence at the site. All the waste pickers, even the ones not part of the association, are back. After the lockdown was eased people returned in numbers. Last week another man was killed at the dump. There are also people living there again.

“The security company has been changed twice and still there has been no improvement. The municipality is failing to address the problems at the site.”

Another waste picker said they were praying the toxic fumes would not affect their health. “The fire is quite big. We are wearing masks and praying we do not get sick.” She said municipal officials fighting the fire had separated the waste into sections to keep the fire burning on one side, to prevent it from engulfing the entire site.

She also said a person was killed at the site about two weeks ago by other waste pickers. “It’s not safe here, but we have to put food on the table.”

Police spokesperson Thembeka Mbele confirmed a 38-year-old man was stabbed to death by five unknown men at a landfill site in Hayfields.

A case of murder was opened at Alexandra Road police station for investigation.

GroundWork’s Musa Chamane said the challenges at the landfill site were the result of poor management.

“If you tell the municipality that managing a landfill site requires special skills, they do not believe you. You can go there now and you will find normal people working there. There are no engineers on site. If they had been doing what they are supposed to do, which is cover the waste daily, this would not have happened. The waste would have been underground. But right now we are dealing with a thick smoke blanketing the city that spread to an area like Edendale, almost 15km away.”

He said only community action would get the municipality's attention because government departments could not take legal action against each other.

"The local communities around the landfill site must take the municipality to court. I know schools close to the dump had signed petitions asking the municipality to relocate the site because on days like these, if there had been normal schooling, they would have had to release the children," he said.

Municipal spokesperson Thobeka Mafumbatha said their teams were doing their best to put out the fire.

Mafumbatha denied that those living on the landfill site were back.

"Those people were removed ages ago and the place has been fenced with restricted access."

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