

Purgatory for the poor

NIREN TOLSI | DURBAN, SOUTH AFRICA - Mar 31 2009 06:00

'The other day, my [nine-year-old] daughter and her friend were coming back from school through the bushes and a man tried to rape them,' says Neftal Ntuli (40)

"Luckily a car was going past and the driver brought them home. In broad daylight! It's not safe there."

Ntuli, his wife and three children form part of the first batch of families relocated by the eThekweni municipality from their informal shack settlement near Umlazi's King Goodwill Zwelithini Stadium to a transit camp in peri-urban T-section.

The city plans to relocate about 700 families as it refurbishes the stadium for the World Cup.

The transit camp appears a sort of purgatory for the poor: tin shacks stand beneath electricity pylons and close to a landfill site in a remote area.

Matthew Havinga, national operations manager for EnviroServ, the company managing the landfill, said it was dormant but should be monitored for another 15 to 20 years.

Havinga said the site's fence was stolen continuously and sold as scrap. His company hoped to erect a palisade fence in about two months' time.

The city's developers have not followed through on recommendations to ring-fence a buffer zone between the camp and the fence. Nor have adequate warnings been posted.

Desmond D'Sa of the South Durban Community Environmental Alliance said methane gas emissions were a concern and "leachate seepage into groundwater that could be used for drinking by animals and even people".

At the camp recently, Nomfundo Mxhiki was concerned about the toilets. "There are only 10 toilets but the number of people is expanding and they haven't dropped new toilets," she says. The municipality hasn't cleaned the toilets: a swarm of maggots has colonised one entirely. Others are seeping with faeces. All were unusable.

KwaZulu-Natal's environmental affairs department confirmed that the municipality had not done an environmental impact assessment before moving people to the camp.

Environmental lawyer Rommel Naidoo said the municipality had a "duty of care obligation, spelled out by the National Environmental Management Act, to mitigate adverse conditions."

According to research, exposure to electromagnetic fields above 0.4 microteslas doubles the risk of childhood leukaemia and can lead to adult brain cancer and miscarriages. A 2008 Bern University study found the risk of Alzheimer's disease increases the longer one lives in electromagnetic fields associated with pylons.

At the shack settlement crammed between Zwelithini Stadium, Mangosuthu Highway (Umlazi's bustling arterial road) and the train lines, single mother Sthembile Dlomo (26) says no one warned her about the health risks. "We had meetings with the municipality, the last one was in January, but we weren't allowed to raise our issues."

Formidable Fikelephi Xaba (56), who supports herself and her husband by selling home-made African beer, is adamant she will not move. "If I move there, I can't do any business because my customers come from the trains and the road," Xaba says.

It's a common refrain; those removed struggle to get transport or have become distanced from sources of income. "I'm happy about the World Cup," says unemployed Ntuli, "but my life has changed."

Julie-May Ellingson, head of eThekweni's strategic and 2010 projects, did not answer questions emailed by the *M&G* two weeks ago.

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