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Ombudsman lashes LHDA



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MASERU – THE Ombudsman has berated the Lesotho Highlands Development Authority (LHDA) for neglecting communities affected by the building of the Polihali Dam.

Ombudsman Advocate Tlotliso Polaki has found that “Polihali Phase II construction has resulted in damage to existing dwellings through blasting and heavy machinery”.

“The (Ombudsman) evidenced several houses with structural cracks, including one complete collapse,” she said.

In Masakong village, a resident 'Masebenzile Lengoasa disclosed that her house started cracking in 2023 during tunnel construction and blasting.

The house collapsed on November 5, 2024.

Her husband who was in the house escaped uninjured.

Lengoasa lodged a formal complaint with the LHDA, which said would inspect the house.

No definite date has been given for the village resettlement.

'Makhotsang Lengoasa reported the collapse of her kitchen to the LHDA authorities at Polihali in 2024.

The LHDA had informed them in 2017 that surveys had been completed and they should cease construction of new houses.

However, they subsequently lodged a complaint with the LHDA that their families were growing and they needed to extend houses to accommodate adult children.

The LHDA reportedly agreed that they could continue to extend houses until further notice.

She indicated that in January last year, they were informed that they should halt construction of new houses even though relocation dates had not been set and communicated.

In Ha-Tlhakola 'Matšepang Lengoasa reported that her house partially collapsed in 2022.

She rebuilt it without lodging any complaint with the LHDA as she was not aware that the damage could have been caused by blasting.

She further explained the house continues to crack.

The Ombudsman found that the LHDA promised to relocate them once major constructions resume.

“Resettlement was presumed to start in 2022, but in her village, only the burial site was relocated in July 2022, on the basis that graveyard relocation was less complex than households’ relocation,” Advocate Polaki said.

She said the LHDA said 48 damaged houses have been repaired, 28 under the Dam Project and 20 under the Tunnel Project.

She said while villagers complained about ongoing blasting, noise, and dust pollution, evidence on dust severity was conflicting, with some saying it was not excessive and was manageable.

Advocate Polaki said the project has to account for community impacts and determine appropriate mitigation.

The inspection established that consultative processes were perceived as deficient.

Communities alleged that the LHDA failed to conduct meaningful, inclusive, and timely consultations.

Information regarding compensation rates, formulas, and relocation sites was not adequately disclosed, preventing informed decision-making by affected persons, she said.

“Community consultation was treated as a procedural exercise rather than meaningful dialogue, with consultations occurring after project decisions had been finalised,” she said.

“This was evident where affected residents faced relocation with limited choice in resettlement sites and expressed dissatisfaction with replacement housing quality.”

She said compensation rates for lost arable land, fruit trees and communal assets were perceived as arbitrary and insufficient, falling below standards required to maintain pre-project living standards.

A central point of contention is the 50-year compensation period, which residents argue should be lifetime or 99-year entitlement to ensure intergenerational security.

As of December last year, Phase I arrears stood at M142.2 million, with future compensation costs of M473 million, the Ombudsman has found.

She said Phase II arrears were M6.7 million, with future compensation costs of M24.9 million.

Some households, she said, were forced to relocate without adequate compensation or livelihood restoration.

Staff Reporter

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