

Building Accidents Reveal Some Shaky Foundations in the Industry

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Safety regulations in SA's construction have been in the spotlight recently, due to a number of fatal accidents on site.

Experts in the building industry have cited skills shortages, insufficient inspections and monitoring, builders' fatigue, incompetence and lack of experience as the major causes of buildings collapsing.

Over the past three weeks, Gauteng -- a province with a vast number construction sites -- experienced some building collapses that saw a number of workers being injured, with at least four dying.

The latest incidents took place in Rosebank and at Little Falls, in Roodepoort.

A 58-year-old chipper tractor driver was killed at a demolition site in Rosebank when a pillar collapsed on the first floor of the Volkswagen building.

Three workers were killed at Little Falls after a partially completed building collapsed.

Reported incidents and fatalities rose 8% last year to 905, compared with the same period the year before, when the construction industry reported 837 incidents and fatalities

The Engineering Council of SA, a regulatory body for engineers, is investigating the incidents.

The body has made an appeal for the construction sector to ensure that precautionary measures are taken to minimise loss of lives.

Some of the experts argue that the labour department should accept much of the blame -- for not having enough inspectors and the necessary capacity to monitor construction sites, and for failing to handle the pressure of dealing with the growing number of companies competing to get a share of the booming construction market.

The Council for the Built Environment, the national professional regulator, has raised major concerns about the increasing rate of incidents.

Still, the regulatory body was sceptical about pointing fingers, opting for a proper integration of accountability within the industry.

Bheki Zulu, the council's CE, says recent reports of building collapses have become a worrying issue.

"One of the things that we have identified was that the labour department does not have capacity to inspect the constructed buildings," he said.

"As a country, we need to get rid of such accidents, and it is possible to do that if we work together."

However, Jimmy Saunders, the CEO of Compliance Practitioners, a private company that inspects construction sites, says there is need to clarify issues without fear of being judged racist or xenophobic.

The majority of small construction companies are owned by black people who lack the necessary expertise and experience required to compete with the demands in the industry, he says.

He also says that the country is facing a serious challenge in terms of skills shortage, especially the safety management skills needed at construction sites.

Saunders says small black construction companies, compared with highly rated companies such as Murray & Roberts and WBHO, have a greater tendency to employ unskilled foreign nationals because they cannot afford competitive wages.

Such a practice exposes innocent workers to a dangerous working environment.

Employees, the majority overworked and working under stressful conditions, were forced to do shoddy work or resort to "short cuts" -- something that is contributing to work-related accidents, he says.

The government is also grappling with construction problems.

It has even gone as far as fast-tracking the Built Environmental Professionals Bill in Parliament.



The bill is aimed at establishing a South African council for the built environment, to regulate the training and registration of professionals in the building industry.

However, the bill has not been welcomed by certain bodies and has drawn a lot of criticism .

The Engineering Council of SA says the bill, while seeking to address major problems in the industry, awards a lot of power to the public works minister -- a step that could lead to excessive ministerial authority.

The council also argues that some of the problems the bill hopes to solve can be handled through other forums, instead of creating new laws.

The National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) is concerned about the high number of its members being killed during freak accidents at building sites. NUM spokesman Lesiba Sishoka says there are many reasons leading to the accidents.

"Small construction companies, which are emerging in large numbers in the Gauteng province, are posing a big problem in terms of construction safety management because they usually take advantage of the high unemployment rate and use the services of desperate foreign nationals," Sishoka says.

"Most of these small companies are not legally registered and therefore it is difficult to establish whether they are in compliance with the industry regulations."

Happy Namane, a construction worker employed by WBHO in Rosebank, says most accidents happen because some companies do not provide training to workers.

Unlike other construction companies, WBHO has safety sessions with workers once or twice a week, he says. "We discuss safety issues and are taught about how to avoid accidents. You are not allowed to walk around the construction site without protective clothing, or with an unfastened belt when you are working from above the building."

He says all construction workers get worried when they hear of people being killed by collapsing structures.

The labour department could not be reached for comment.

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