

Blue killer unchecked in S.African toxic towns

August 9 2012, by Justine Gerardy

Death knows the small town of Prieska all too well.

A poisonous legacy of South Africa's years as a global blue asbestos hub, the Grim Reaper has snaked through here for decades, wiping out families and striking down [neighbours](#) with deadly precision.

"In most of the houses in our street, there is someone who has died of asbestosis or mesothelioma," said Chris Julius, 58, who was diagnosed with asbestos cancer three months after his mother-in-law passed away next door.

A former teacher, Julius never worked at the town's mill or in the nearby hills where mining started in the late 1800s along rich deposits known as the country's "asbestos mountains" that run along the vast Northern Cape.

But he has mesothelioma, an aggressive [lung cancer](#) whose diagnosis is a [death sentence](#).

"It felt like I was going to the electric chair," said Julius, who lives 100 metres (yards) from where the now-demolished mill once spat dust over the town.

"I still feel the same. I live from one day to the next. I can't really plan. It's very difficult for me to say goodbye, I can't even discuss it with my wife. For her, it's just as emotional an issue."

Locals were once pitted against mining firms in David and Goliath-style class action battles which were settled about a decade ago.

Yet nearly one in three homes is still contaminated, according to government statistics.

-- A national environmental emergency --

[Environmental scientist](#) Rob Jones estimates [asbestos exposure](#) is killing up to 52 people a year in the Northern Cape, while nearly 90 percent of 36 communities he surveyed had one or more sites ranked as severe risk.

"This is really a national environmental emergency that should be dealt with. It is analogous to Libby, Montana in the US and Wittenoom, Australia," said Jones, who has studied contamination levels for the state.

Wittenoom was shut down by Australian authorities in 1966 and Libby has received millions of dollars for rehabilitation.

Yet, while South Africa once produced 98 percent of the world's blue asbestos, the government has yet to act with the same urgency for its dozens of toxic communities.

The older generation in Prieska tells of playing obliviously on soft dumps as children, with no warnings from mine bosses or authorities. Documented accounts point to fibres being dusted off fruit picked from trees.

While still possible to stumble across a pile of fibres lying in the open, those days are over.

But asbestos is a patient killer: it can lie dormant for decades.

"Imagine walking along a dirt road that is contaminated with asbestos fibres and a vehicle drives past. The dust that you inhale is full of microscopic asbestos fibres," explained Jones.

"The same scenario applies to sweeping the garden, house, working in the garden, etc. The exposures are almost constant."

On the wall of a homely cafe, not too far from where the old mill lay, is a black-and-white photograph which shows a giant dust cloud above the tiny settlement.

It is an image that haunts doctor Deon Smith who moved to the area 28 years ago.

"We see about 10 cases a year, new cases of mesothelioma," he told AFP.

"It has a very, very poor prognosis," he said. "There's no cure."

Mesothelioma does not discriminate. It targets poor locals who never worked on the mines, to former mill bosses and entire households.

-- Whole families wiped out --

One such family are the Cilentos. Only two siblings are still alive after having watched their parents, two brothers and two sisters die.

Wearing a hoop earring and Jimi Hendrix t-shirt, Nicholas lives with a permanent oxygen tube piped into his nose and can only walk a few steps before having to rest.

"I knew I am going to get sick but I didn't expect it to be permanent. I'm suffering a lot, I didn't know I'll be suffering so much. I learned to accept it, I mean there is nothing else I can do," the gaunt 60-year-old told AFP.

"All the people are talking about this sickness and why is the government not doing anything," he added.

In June, the Department of Environmental Affairs said nearly 5,000 out of some 23,000 households and 400 kilometres (248 miles) of road surfaces were polluted in the Northern Cape. Out of 45 schools surveyed, 26 were affected including four in Prieska.

Rehabilitation is estimated at 249,000 rands (\$31,000, 25,000-euros) per housing plot and 1.2 million rands per square kilometre (.3 square mile) of contaminated roads.

"It is taking some time because the remediation activities involve different stakeholders and at this moment the action plan is being finalised," said spokeswoman Roopa Singh.

For the sick, the town's legal settlement made no provision for latent illness and the government does not pay compensation.

Locals largely do not qualify for trusts set up for other mines, such as the Asbestos Relief Trust which paid out 3,555 claims by March.

"Rehabilitation is crucial because someone exposed today may only get an asbestos related disease say 40 years later," said Jim te Water Naude, a doctor at the trust.

"The most likely to suffer are children, and those exposed environmentally."

With the companies long gone, the buck now stops with the state which is accused of "paralysis by analysis".

"Other than study the problem, no real efforts have been initiated to date (to my knowledge)," said Jones.

"[Asbestos](#) does not rot; it never goes away on its own. It is only safe when it is completely removed from the potential of human disturbance," he warned.

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