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eThekwini denies health risk in basin

Oct 16, 2012 | Edward West

South Durban Community Environmental Alliance says residents in South of Durban Industrial Basin are exposed to industrial gases and chemicals that are increasing the risk of cancer and asthma

THOUSANDS of residents in South of Durban Industrial Basin and their children were exposed to industrial gases and chemicals that were increasing the risk of cancer and asthma, South Durban Community Environmental Alliance co-coordinator Desmond D'sa said on Monday.

The organisation is at the forefront of opposition by many of the 285,000 people living in the area against plans by the eThekwini Municipality to build new freight and logistics facilities, as an adjunct to Transnet's multibillion-rand port expansion plans over the next few decades.

Durban's South Basin is one of the country's biggest industrial zones and it includes two fuel refiners, Engen and BP-owned Sapref.

The alliance fears increased industrial and transport activity in the area caused by the port expansion will only worsen an already poor health situation. The municipality seems unwilling to address the health problems.

The municipality said in response to Business Day's questions that it is "not possible" to make a very broad but scientifically robust statement regarding a whole community, and whether there is a consistent risk to the health of the community at all times.

Mr D'sa says a study in 2001 showed that pupils at a primary school in the South Durban Basin had the highest incidence of asthma recorded scientifically. Symptoms reported by parents showed that 52% of school learners in grades 3-6 had asthma and 26% had persistent asthma.

The cancer risk in the area is 500 times the normal level of risk, says Mr D'sa.

He says normally people with HIV /AIDS can live productively with medication, but industrial emissions break down the immune system, in spite of the medication and "if you get AIDS here, you don't last". He says a key risk chemical is benzene, a known carcinogen which the municipality no longer monitors.

There are explosions and chemical spills in the area every year, and the municipality had failed to implement an undertaking it made following a large explosion at the Engen refinery last October for an emergency evacuation scheme for residents to be set up, he says.

The municipality cautions against "selective quotations" of scientific studies, and says the study referred to earlier had certain limitations.

These include that the study did not address causes of the asthma, it did not investigate other populations living in South Durban, it did not include an unexposed comparison group and a fuller evaluation of other potential risk factors including allergy status, and exposure inside of homes was not evaluated. During the study the surrounding air pollution levels were lower than average levels in the past, which raised the possibility of historical health effects being underestimated, the municipality says.

Another study was done in 2004-2005.

This compared residents in southern Durban with people north of Durban and found that the highest incidence of people with exposures to nitrogen oxide, sulphur dioxide and other particulate pollution was in the south.

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