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The Michael Komape case: Government should be deeply ashamed

The Department of Basic Education and the Limpopo Education Department should be deeply ashamed over their lack of accountability for the death of five-year-old Michael Komape.

Michael suffocated and drowned in a pit toilet at his school near Polokwane in 2014.

Yet three years later, neither national nor provincial government will accept responsibility, and they have yet to apologise to his family or to offer damages. Equally, government also refuses to accept responsibility for its neglect, or to eliminate many of the hazardous and unhygienic pit toilets in the province – and, as a result, thousands of other learners in Limpopo still face the same dangers as Michael did.

Government's treatment of the Michael Komape matter has been disgusting.

One would expect a people-centred government to go out of its way to ensure justice when a tragedy like this happens. Decent and ethical government leaders would immediately act to solve the problem, apologise to the family, and jack up the standard of Limpopo schools.

But that has not been the case. The same national and provincial departments that have messed up the provision of text books in the province, allowed learners to study under trees for years, and destroyed their own school feeding schemes, have ducked and dived on this issue for three years now.

Soon, however, that could come to an end.

SECTION27, a courageous social justice organisation that forms a key part of the Save South Africa campaign, has stepped in to take legal action that will hopefully ensure government is finally held accountable.

In a case that starts today (Monday), SECTION27 has asked the Limpopo High Court to award damages to Michael's family. It is also asking for a declaratory order to clarify the State's obligations regarding school sanitation – a request that is itself an indictment on government's lack of commitment to caring for the poor and for young learners.

This is not a numbers game where you can proclaim to spend millions of rands on toilets -- yet children fall to their death and girls miss class because they cannot face the indignity of going to school when they have their periods.

SECTION27 is acting as the family's legal representative, and we know the organisation and its activists will show the same tireless level of commitment that has marked its other recent work, including the recent Life Esidimeni hearings in Gauteng – a situation which is yet another blight on our uncaring government.

We fully support the SECTION27 intervention, we wish them well with their legal action, and salute the organisation and its activists for their commitment to ensuring social justice for the people of South Africa.

We join them in calling for #Justice4Michael.

The underlying tragedy is that Michael Komape's death could have been avoided if government was spending public money where it is needed, rather than allowing millions to be sucked out of the fiscus through corruption and malpractice.

As SECTION27 will argue, the 50 000 hazardous toilets in Limpopo schools could be replaced in three years if irregular, fruitless and wasteful expenditure were eliminated. But because the fiscus has been looted and mismanaged, government argues that there is no money for essential infrastructure like toilets – and that it needs up to 30 years to replace them.

It shouldn't have to be like this. But it is – for now – while we continue to demand a government that respects the values of the Constitutions, that carries out its responsibilities to the people, and is led by leaders who have integrity and respect the people who put them in office.

#Justice4Michael