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DEVASTATION

Death by water tanker: The tragic human cost of the country's water crisis

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THE tragic death of Celani Zungu, who was fatally struck by a municipal water tanker in Adams Mission, Durban on Sunday, has ignited a debate regarding the human cost of South Africa's water crisis.

Others have also died over water. In 2024, a father of three died while collecting water from a borehole in Verulam.

For years, the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) has probed the country's water crises in provinces such as KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng.

In parts of the country, residents rely on water tankers or buy water.

University of Pretoria Centre for Human Rights' Dr Olayinka Adeniyi said access to sufficient water is a fundamental human right in South Africa, as per Section 27(1)(b) of the Constitution, which provides that everyone has the right of access to sufficient water.

Section 27(2) requires the state to take reasonable legislative and other measures, within its available resources, to achieve the progressive realisation of this right.

Additionally, the Water Services Act 108 of 1997 establishes a statutory framework for access to a basic water supply and authorises the adoption of national standards governing water services.

The regulations prescribe minimum standards relating to the quantity and quality of potable water to be supplied over specified periods.

"Water is essential to life, health, hygiene, sanitation, food preparation and human dignity. Access to water is also closely connected to other constitutional rights, including the rights to health care, adequate housing, education and an environment that is not harmful to health or well-being," Adeniyi said.

"The right of access to water does not necessarily mean that water must be supplied to every person through an individual household connection. Depending on the circumstances, water may be supplied through household taps, communal taps, boreholes, storage tanks or other appropriate systems. The central question is whether people have reasonable, equitable and reliable access to sufficient and safe water."

Adeniyi said the right to water does not mean that every temporary interruption automatically constitutes a constitutional violation.

"The relevant question is whether the state's response is reasonable, effective, transparent and equitable, and whether it is genuinely directed towards restoring a sustainable water supply within a reasonable period. Ultimately, all these considerations are connected to the protection of human dignity," Adeniyi said.

President Cyril Ramaphosa recently announced R156 billion funding towards water and sanitation infrastructure over the next three years.

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