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Slow upgrade of VCH sewage system disappoints Opposition

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The Health Minister during a visit to the sewage system. The National Wastewater Taskforce will be meeting this coming week to receive a presentation from the design contractor, Kramer, on the proposed design and work plan for the rehabilitation of the hospital sewage system. Photo: Supplied

The Opposition bloc is disappointed about the government's slow effort to address the poor maintenance of the Vila Central Hospital (VCH) sewage system.

"It is very sad to see that the government through the Ministry of Health (MOH) is taking so much time to solve that issue once and for all and frustrating to that the Ministry of Climate Change or Environment Unit didn't do anything to stop that unlawful matter by using environmental laws under its authority to make them abide with it," Opposition bloc said in a statement.

"Firstly, VCH as the main referral hospital in the country, situated in the centre of the capital city of Port Vila as a tourism destination, surrounded by hotels makes the situation more difficult to allow such environmental disaster to happen without reactions from the authorities concerned knowing very well that tourism is one of the most very important economic activity.

"Secondly, the local population and communities living along the coast of Second Lagoon, Tasiriki, Sea Side, Namba 2, Namba 3 as well as Erakor Bridge and Erakor village and even the local population of Port Vila with very low income usually use the sea in this zone to meet their daily needs. Unfortunately, they are the first to be affected by this catastrophe caused by reckless humans which makes our environment polluted.

"Thirdly, it is a common understanding that the 2024 budget has not passed yet but this excuse is not good enough to drag this human-caused disaster destroying the environment and affecting communities."

The Opposition group said this issue must be treated very seriously and seen as a natural disaster to allow the release of emergency funds quickly.

They are requesting the Prime Minister to intervene to ensure that the authorities concerned pull their socks up and treat this issue seriously with immediate effect.

In its response, the Ministry of Climate Change (MoCC) said the National Wastewater Taskforce is working with MoCC and MOH to address the issue and the general effluent runoff into the Erakor Lagoons and into the Port Vila Harbour.

The Taskforce held its first meeting of this year this week and have considered the progress of the project to rehabilitate the VCH sewerage system that was developed during the colonial era and upgraded over the past years with a treatment plant to become more environmentally friendly.

This was followed by the allocation of funds by MOH, with funding assistance from the Government of China, to undertake the rehabilitation works, according to the MoCC.

“The Taskforce will be meeting again this coming week to receive a presentation from the design contactor, Kramer, on the proposed design and work plan for the rehabilitation of the hospital sewage system. Following the Taskforce’s approval, the design will be finalized and the actual rehabilitation work put out to tender.”

The National Wastewater Taskforce is established under the Pollution (Control) Act No.10 of 2013.

One of its principles is to enforce the Act by monitoring and inspecting sewage systems to ensure they are in compliance with the requirements outlined in the Act, the national wastewater standards, and other relevant regulations. This includes verifying the proper functioning of sewage treatment facilities and adherence to environmental standards.

The institutions that are members of the National Wastewater Taskforce are: the Department of Environmental Protection and Conservation under the MoCC; Department of Public Health under MoH; Vanuatu Maritime Safety Authority, Department of Public Utilities, Department of Ports and Harbours under the Ministry of Public Utilities; Vanuatu Project Management Unit under the Office of the Prime Minister, Department of Local Authorities, Port Vila City Council and the Shefa Provincial Council under the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Erakor Chiefs Council, and UNELCO Engie.