

## **A CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY DISASTER DUE TO THE COLLAPSE OF A HOTEL COMPLEX THAT DRAMATICALLY ADVANCED THE CAUSE OF SAFETY AND HEALTH IN UGANDA**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Liberalization of the economy of Uganda since 1990 has spurred development in a variety of sectors bringing with it an up swing in the Building and Construction Industry with a growth average of 5.7 percent per annum for the last ten years. The Construction Industry has continued to grow at an average rate of 8.8 percent per annum since 1995/96 well above the overall GDP annual growth rate for Uganda, coming next to agriculture in the economy. From the routine, specialized and investigative inspections carried out by the Department of Occupational Safety and Health (DOSH), the industry has many small contractors, a number of medium sized contractors and a few big contractors, often foreign who also get into joint ventures or sub contract a number of medium and small sized contractors on the big projects they do under take. 70% of all construction is informal with many individual developers directly under taking complex construction projects employing mostly unskilled labour to include even children who in many cases are often ignorant, negligent and careless, resulting into numerous hazards claiming a lion's share of many disabling and fatal occurrences.

The construction has been predominantly, construction of new structures for office complexes, shopping malls, industrial zones with factories and warehousing facilities, schools, roads and water projects, bridges, valley dams, hydro electric power dams, fuel filling sites, upgrading or remodeling of existing structures and individual residential houses, etc. Despite this tremendous growth of the industry, the demand for skilled and professional labour is still a major constraint.

On 1<sup>st</sup> September 2004 at 9:00am, one of the blocks of J & M Airport Road Hotel/Apartments and Leisure Centre Construction at Bwebajja, along Entebbe Airport road collapsed when it had reached 3 storeys, when shuttering props were removed at the first floor trapping about 100 workers, killing 11 and seriously injuring 27 while some were rescued and others managed to escape. The construction comprised of several blocks with a workforce of over 400 workers manned directly by the Client in terms of Procurement, Management and Overall Supervision.

The rescue operation of the fatal occurrence took 7 days, 24hours a day, involving Police Fire Brigade, Ministry of Works Housing and Communications (MoWH&C), Red Cross, 3 Major Construction Companies, Local People of the area and many sympathisers since it was located along a major Airport road.

## **OBJECTIVES**

This paper is intended to signify that the different stake holders in the construction industry have roles to play in order to avoid construction safety and health disasters and these roles should be co-ordinated.

The paper is also intended to make the point that the vigilance of the general public is a major tool in provoking those concerned to actively play their role and specifically the necessity of safety and health administrative controls in form of written policy, proper work procedures and practices, information provision, training for skills development, adequate and competent supervision at the level of the undertaking, so as to safe guard against disastrous construction safety and health occurrences.

Further, the paper emphasises the need for proper and adequate National Emergency Plans to accommodate hazardous sectors such as construction.

## **METHODS**

To ascertain the cause of the fatal occurrence, what could have been done to prevent it and what should be done to prevent such other occurrences in the future, a number of accident investigations and thorough specialised inspections of the site by a team of Safety & Health Inspectors and Labour Inspectors coupled with interviews of a cross section of stakeholders to include the developers themselves, supervisors in other sections of the construction site, some workers and officials from other Government Institutions and Departments such as Police, Wakiso District Local Government, Uganda National Bureau of Standards (UNBS), National Environment Management Authority (NEMA), Uganda Institution of Professional Engineers (UIPE), etc were undertaken. The questions during the interviews were to explore the type and quality of materials used, whether they meet the standards, the legality and structural adequacy of the structure, whether built according to the approved plans, whether the project fulfilled the environmental impact assessment requirements and were being followed. Further whether the construction methods being employed were appropriate, the level of skills of the workers being employed to handle the tasks, the supervision hierarchy and line management, whether adequate and competent, the safety and health administrative controls, whether they existed at all and if they existed, their adequacy and how well they were being monitored, the liability policies in place, whether compensation arrangements were underway for the project of such a magnitude and scope, the coordination mechanisms among the various Government institutions and departments, whether it exists, etc.

## **RESULTS**

Due to the Magnitude of the occurrence, it attracted the attention of many sections of Government to include Uganda National Bureau of Standards (UNBS), National Environmental Management Authority (NEMA) among others, Local Government, Wakiso district administration, Non Governmental Organisations, the Public, as hundreds of persons flocked the site everyday including, relatives who stayed on site wailing all day, medics, travellers, etc and was well publicised by the media.

At a high level the site of the accident was visited by the person of the President, the Vice President, several Ministers, Members of Parliament and Government Dignitaries, Professionals, etc. In addition to the normal investigations by the DOSH, a Commission of Inquiry was instituted by MoWH&C on the directive of the President composed of various Experts/Stakeholders, making it a construction disaster under the circumstances.

## **DISCUSSIONS**

Some of the factors that could have lead to the occurrence are;

- The client happened to be a local developer managing the project by himself assisted by his wife for the entire procurement, recruitment of workers, etc for such a complex construction.
- The Engineer/supervisors were proved to be unqualified who could have served well as ordinary foremen.
- The majority of the workers were unskilled, recruited straight from the village about 400 Kms from the city and could have probably been new in the construction field.
- The particular block that collapsed did not exist on the approved plans therefore was an illegal structure.

- Inspection by DOSH was only at the demolition stage of some existing small structures and no notification of the construction had been made as required by law.
- The construction was on a cliff and mass land slide was cited as a possible contributor in addition to poor construction methods and inadequate structural designs.

The factors identified above are some among the many that are responsible for the numerous hazards in the construction industry in Uganda specifically and developing countries in general. To cite a few:

- Lack of a clear Government Policy to regulate the Construction Industry
- Most current regulations are narrow in scope and seem not to address the Safety and Health requirements of the industry to date, which is aggravated by inadequate enforcement, dismal penalties, lack of awareness and understanding and therefore limited compliance.
- The designers, architects, engineers, planners, etc do not assume any obligation for safety, rendering some projects to be designed without safety considerations hence inappropriate construction methods.
- Low Clients attitudes towards Safety and health as most clients want to engage non-formal contractors, with inadequate and incompetent supervision or only for labour and thus never cater for safety, all in an attempt to cut costs.
- Informal constructions comprised of small scale contractors employing semi-skilled and/or unskilled workers and invest little or nothing in safety.
- Most operators of construction equipment are not trained or certified and there is no body to-date to certify them.
- Limited recognition of now the many women employed in the sector to institute programmes focusing on women workers, supervisors and managers to strengthen the position of women.
- Lack of strong contractors' body and strong construction workers union to advise their membership adequately.
- Weak professional institutions to monitor ethical conduct of their members
- Inactive insurance industry
- Lack of proper site planning, organization, controlling, monitoring and reviewing to take into account all the necessary safety measures and their implementation procedures.
- Use of poor quality materials coupled with lack of quality control in violation of National Standards, which are also not sound and failure to follow them where they exist.
- Most accident/injury occurrences go unreported and therefore are not investigated to prevent re-occurrence. Where investigated there is failure to follow up.
- Effects of weather and other disasters

### **LESSONS LEARNT FROM THE TRAGEDY**

- Vigilance was awakened on part of the local authorities who could have inspected the site upon approval of the plans, as well as of other stake holders such as UNBS for materials standards and NEMA for environmental concerns. Further DOSH on its Inspection approach.
- No Safety and Health studies had been done hence no risk assessment for the works undertaken which should have been translated into a safety plan and procedure of Implementation with adequate safety supervision for such a workforce.
- The Client's management of the project by himself was not in order and this provoked the urban authorities to check such individual developments to demand for formal contractors for projects of such magnitudes.

Further, the lack of coordination on site, since each block was manned separately and not as a project as a whole, was an issue to check the role of designers, Architects, etc on projects.

- The skills and competences of the workers on the project was an issue of workers involved in the construction sector.
- Some of the trapped workers were in possession of cellular phones which assisted the rescuers to locate the positions where those workers were trapped as they called their friends out for help. This was useful to get to those particular spots proving the need of communication on sites.
- The nature of the rescue operation checked the emergency and disaster Preparedness of the Country and was found to be wanting.
- Wide media publicity is key in raising concern and anxiety of the public
- Professional bodies condemning and petitioning fateful occurrences checks the competence and ethical conducts of those involved in construction.

### **CONCLUSION:**

According to the Department of Occupational Safety and Health, in the history of the Construction Industry in Uganda, a tragic accident of such magnitude, publicity, attracting high level attention, being thoroughly investigated and disseminated, demanding immediate compensation of the victims, had never occurred. Therefore it was befitting to be called a Disaster which in a way advanced the cause of Safety and Health in the Construction Industry and possibly other Sectors.

In many quarters the slogan is “we should avoid Bwebajja and beyond” meaning we should avoid such another tragedy and its consequences. In the development strategy of Uganda, there is need to uplift the working conditions in all sectors of the economy with particular emphasis on the most vibrant sectors, hence the most hazardous ones such as construction.

This paper therefore makes the case that there should be a change in culture and active efforts of Government, Private Sector, Non-Government Organizations, Designers and Planners, Professional Institutions and vigilance of the General Public. At the level of the under taking, there should be measures such as Safety and Health Policy, Construction Safety and Health Plan (CSHP) and Operational Procedures, Generic Safe Working Practices and a Framework be established for such projects to be undertaken by contractors who should be issued with Certificates for every stage reached during construction, setting up a Joint Institutional Committee to intensify the supervision of such big construction projects.

Further, the challenge is in prevention work, which should be Global and Multi disciplinary to detect needs and expectations in Occupational Safety and Health in general and the Construction Industry/ Sector in particular and to better anticipate and assess human, social and economic costs of occupational accidents and diseases to fight against risk of injuries, damage to health and investment / property.

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