

Graves relocation on LHWPII; exhumation and reburial sensitive to cultural practices



The remains of 193 community members from the villages of Tlhakola and Masakong in Mokhotlong are being relocated and carefully reinterred at a new cemetery in Masakong, starting on June 10, 2024. This relocation is part of a broader plan to move 445 graves and ash heaps from four villages, including Tloha re bue and Malingoaneng. These relocations are necessitated by developments such as the construction of the Polihali village, lodge, operations centre and commercial centre, as well as reservoir inundation.

The relocation is being conducted with the utmost respect, integrity, and discipline required of an archaeological excavation to ensure that all graves and their contents are preserved prior to reinterment. Recognising that relocation is a sensitive and highly emotional process, the Lesotho Highlands Development Authority (LHDA) has engaged the affected households and communities from the onset, considering their needs, opinions, and traditional practices.

To acknowledge the significance of this undertaking, two pre-relocation traditional ceremonies were conducted on June 6, fully funded by the LHDA. Ntate Tsé pang Tsakatsi of Tloha re bue, speaking on behalf of the elders at the




pre-relocation ceremony, thanked the LHDA for observing the cultural custom of slaughtering two cows—one male and one female—to enable the community to call on the ancestors to relocate to the new burial grounds. “We also acknowledge LHDA’s understanding that the affected members’ beliefs and religious customs are diverse, hence the payment of compensation to each affected family to facilitate a customary ceremony in honour of their relocated loved ones,” Ntate Tsakatsi stated.

The area chief of Malingoaneng, Morena Masiphola Sekonyela, commended the Project for treating the remains of the community’s deceased with reverence and respect. He pledged the community leaders' commitment to supporting the LHDA and its service providers in ensuring a dignified reburial for the departed.

Given the sensitivities involved in graves relocation, the LHDA adheres to a strict protocol that fulfils legislative provisions and cultural requirements. This protocol includes in-depth consultations with community leaders, traditional healers, and families of the deceased from the early stages of grave identification, registration, and verification to the selection of new burial grounds and coffins. Relevant government ministries, including the Ministry of Health and the Departments of Culture and Environment, are also consulted to ensure all necessary permits are obtained.

“In recognizing the emotional weight of this process on the families involved, the LHDA is providing counselling services through social workers who are also ensuring that the exhumation and internment process aligns with the preferences of the affected families, the outlined criteria and acceptable international standards,” confirmed Gerard Mokone, LHDA Polihali Branch Manager.





PGS Heritage-Koti Se Phola Funeral Services Joint Venture (PGS-Koti JV), comprising a team of professional undertakers and archaeologists, is working with hired members of the community to manage the exhumation and reburial at the new burial grounds, in close collaboration with the affected families.

Graves relocation is a component of the resettlement action planning, which includes developing and implementing plans to mitigate physical and economic displacements associated with Phase II of the Lesotho Highlands Water Project. This process requires close engagement with affected asset owners, local government, and traditional leaders. The participation of affected households is essential in determining relocation areas, village layouts, and house plans. The resettlement process begins with asset identification, registration, and verification, conducted with the full participation of affected owners, community representatives, chiefs, and council members.

The Polihali site establishment graves relocation is the most extensive undertaking within Phase II of the project, surpassing the 2020 relocation of 131 Masalla graves impacted by the Polihali Western Access Road-East. The relocation of graves within the main reservoir inundation area is planned for a later stage, with the contract expected to be advertised in the third quarter of 2024.

In the coming weeks, the LHDA will resume engagements with traditional and spiritual healers on the migration of intangible cultural heritage assets, such as shrines, sacred pools, and initiation schools.

