



Human cost of fireworks too high – Church commission

RAPHAEL VASSALLO

THE Malta Archdiocese's Environment Commission (KA) yesterday lashed out at the authorities for failing to take appropriate action in the face of the unacceptably high death toll associated with the local fireworks industry, after a spate of accidents which left seven people dead last year.

In its most strongly worded statement to date – issued in response to last month's Pyrotechnics Commission's report, commissioned shortly after the St Helen's Fireworks Factory explosion which cost five lives in Gharghur last July – the KA deplored the fact that none of its own proposals was ever taken on board, and took umbrage at what it described as a "fatalistic attitude" whereby safety in fireworks production is considered an ideal too unrealistic to strive for.

"Nobody doubts that fireworks have an important part to play in these feasts," the Commission pointed out. "At the same time, the price society has to pay for these fireworks is too high, and for this reason the same society has the right and the duty to

make its voice heard in a public discussion on the subject."

While acknowledging the inherent danger of pyrotechnics as a hobby, the KA stressed that this in itself was no excuse to postpone necessary safety reforms.

"We agree (with the Pyrotechnics Commission) that because of the nature of the work involved in fireworks production, we can never manage all the risks so that they are completely eliminated. But we feel that this reality is often used by some to justify and render acceptable certain shortcomings in the fireworks manufacturing process, so that it appears impossible to do anything to reduce the danger."

Significantly, the KA supports recommendations to immediately close all fireworks factories operating within the outside safety distance of 183 metres: a proposal which forcefully calls to mind a controversial Cabinet decision in 2001 to legitimise the continued operation of the St Helen's factory in Gharghur, by reclassifying a nearby road in order to circumvent the safety distance regulation.

The same factory exploded on July 27, killing five pyrotechnics enthusiasts who were

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Juventus goalkeepers Gianluigi Buffon and Emanuele Belardi enter the Ta' Qali stadium yesterday for their training session ahead of today's showcase match against Valletta FC. Fans turned out en masse, packing the stadium to watch their Italian heroes train. See page 20 for more details (Photo – Domenic Aquilina)

Christmas shutdown serves as smokescreen for MEPA applications

KARL SCHEMBRI

THE festive season is clearly a time to rejoice, particularly for architects presenting their clients' development applications at a time when everyone is too busy drinking, eating and opening Christmas presents to notice what is being proposed next door.

In a time-honoured tradition, development applications to MEPA poured in by the hundreds during the authority's 10-day shutdown period between Christmas and the New

Year, with a good part of them proposing construction outside development zones.

Between 15 and 29 December, around 400 applications had to be filtered by objectors who could not get through to MEPA.

As potential objectors tried getting the full development details from the MEPA offices, they realised this was impossible given that the authority was on shutdown, but the two-week submission period remained the same.

This meant that even in the remote chance that potential

objectors noticed the newspaper announcements of construction about to take place in their vicinity, they were unable to go to MEPA to check out the plans or ask for guidance due to the prevailing shutdown.

Reacting to repeated objectors' protests, MEPA finally extended the submissions deadline yesterday through a legal notice issued at the last minute, which revokes the official deadline carried with each application, although the decision has not yet been advertised.

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