

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

DELAY IN THE OPENING OF PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES

The Minister of Higher Education (Prof. Luo)

Mr Speaker, thank you for giving me this opportunity to render a ministerial statement regarding the delay in the opening of public universities, in particular the University of Zambia (UNZA) and the Copperbelt University (CBU).

Sir, in October, 2017, the first case of cholera was recorded in Lusaka. Towards the back end of the year, the epidemic had escalated to alarming proportions. In a bid to mitigate the effects of the epidemic, the Government, through the leadership of the hon. Minister of Health, decided to keep all schools, institutions of higher learning and other public entities such as markets, restaurants and pubs closed until such a time that the spread of the disease would be contained. These public higher learning institutions, namely; UNZA, CBU, Mulungushi, Kwame Nkrumah, Chalimbana, Mukuba and Kapasa Universities, which were scheduled to have opened in early January, 2018 were closed.

Mr Speaker, following the announcement by the hon. Minister of Health, the universities were routinely inspected by the public health teams from the Lusaka City Council (LCC) and the Ministry of Health on 2nd and 3rd January, 2018. The inspection was meant to assess the extent to which universities had complied with the standard public health requirements for learning institutions. Subsequent to these inspections, a report was produced with detailed areas that required attention.

Sir, in this regard, it was decided that UNZA and CBU would not reopen from recess on 5th January, 2018, until all the necessary rehabilitations were undertaken. In the same light, the reopening of Mulungushi, Chalimbana, Kwame Nkrumah, Mukuba and Kapasa Makasa Universities were also postponed after public health inspections.

Mr Speaker, on 12th January, 2018, an announcement was made at a joint press briefing that universities that met public health requirements would be inspected and allowed to open. UNZA and CBU remained closed because they did not meet the requirements for reopening. Among the universities that were cleared to reopen were Chalimbana and Kwame Nkrumah. Notwithstanding this clearance, these two universities experienced setbacks when they opened as they reverted to their old habits of not maintaining hygiene which presented a danger to the learners. Both Chalimbana and Kwame Nkrumah were again closed.

Mr Speaker, the continued closure of most of these institutions was in the interest of the general public. These institutions host huge cohorts in a concentrated area which would have placed the country at great risk had the institutions opened at the height of the cholera epidemic. These populations consist of people who come from all over the country so containing an epidemic that breaks out in a place like UNZA would be next to impossible unless the whole community was quarantined. Secondly, the hygiene standards in our public institutions have fallen to their lowest. This is why Chalimbana and Kwame Nkrumah, that had been opened, had to be closed after second inspection because they reverted to poor hygiene practices.

Sir, let me take advantage of this ministerial statement to announce that the inspections that have commenced through public health teams as a result of this epidemic will continue. This will ensure that high standards of hygiene are maintained in our highest institutions of learning. Therefore, our institutions will be inspected routinely, even after they open.

Mr Speaker, my ministry realises the important role that these institutions play in the economic dispensation of this country. It is this realisation that prompted my ministry to work closely with the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Local Government and the Disaster Management and Mitigation Unit (DMMU) in the Office of the Vice-President to ensure that existing sanitation conditions at these institutions were worked on, not only for the benefit of students and the public, but also to ensure the health of our students and staff in the future.

Sir, the Government has been striving to improve infrastructure at the three institutions by increasing students' accommodation and learning facilities. However, the bulk of the infrastructure has remained in a bad state due to lack of periodic maintenance by our university management. This has meant that sanitation facilities, among other infrastructure, have become deplorable and, in this instance, pose a threat to the health and wellbeing of the students and the general populace of this country.

Furthermore, Sir, our culture of dependence on especially the Government has created a situation in universities where taps, cisterns, sockets and other facilities are vandalised with impunity and there is no care to public property. The *boma iyanganepe* syndrome has taken centre stage in our institutions.

Mr Speaker, to ensure that the lives were safeguarded and the need to prevent cholera outbreaks in these institutions, my ministry worked with management teams of the institutions to ensure an improvement in sanitation and other conditions. This was not only aimed at protecting students and staff but also the great public of this country as the escalation of the cholera epidemic had become an epi-centre.

Mr Speaker, the focus of rehabilitation works at the three universities has been rehabilitation of the sewer systems, ablution blocks and bathing facilities such as showers, mending of water leakages and the general improvement of water supply through water reticulation. Subsequent to this rehabilitation, the Ministry of Health working with authorities have continued conducting inspections of the facilities to ensure that work is done to acceptable standards. Further inspections have been carried out since 26th January, 2018 and more continued on the 8th and 9th February, 2018. We expect the Copperbelt University to be inspected on 26th February, 2018. We hope this will be the last inspection before re-opening. I have also personally inspected both the Copperbelt University and the University of Zambia.

Mr Speaker, these inspections and my interactions with the university management revealed that despite the gallant efforts of the universities, the task of bringing the facilities to acceptable public health standards was a mammoth task that required a lot of financial and human resources.

For example, it was established that while the environment had been generally cleaned, the state of the university infrastructure still required more work. It was also very clear that both students and management had not been taking good care of the facilities. In blocks where students are allowed to cook, the rooms were filthy and had come into a state of disrepair. Even in places where cooking facilities existed, they were not being cleaned regularly by the students. Stoves which were once black had turned black on top of black, a colour that does not exist. As a result of this, it was also apparent that the resources that are required to the universities through their own ventures were insufficient to meet the cost of undertaking such comprehensive rehabilitations. For example, the University of Zambia put in K1 million into the rehabilitation works which was only sufficient to cater for the old residences. The infrastructure was made of concrete and for them to reach the piping it required heavy equipment. Mulungushi University also spent K1.2 million but this was also insufficient. It was therefore, necessary for the Government to step in and ensure that institutions were rehabilitated properly and on time to allow for our young learners to go back to class.

Mr Speaker, allow me to pay special recognition of the effort by the hon. Minister of Finance and his team who provided K5.8 million of the infrastructure budget to pay for the contractual work to upgrade facilities at these institutions. Of the K5.8 million, K2 million was given to the University of Zambia, K1.8 million to the Copperbelt University and K1.2 million to Mulungushi and Kwame Nkrumah Universities respectively. This provision has gone a long way to rehabilitate the ablution blocks at the four universities. My engagement with the Ministry of Finance continues to bear fruit. I wish to acknowledge and thank the ministry for their unwavering support. I also want to thank our men in uniform who reinforced the works at the Copperbelt University and will soon be moving to University of Zambia (UNZA) to enforce the works there. Because of this support, a comprehensive rehabilitation of sanitation and water reticulation facilities at these institutions is underway and nearing completion. As I speak, planned works at the Copperbelt University have reached 95 per cent while those at the University of Zambia are at 80 per cent.

Mr Speaker, with all this effort, we will see the re-opening of some of these universities. For example, Mulungushi University opened on 18th February, 2018 and it is envisaged that the other

two universities will also be re-opening as soon as the Public Health Inspectors from the Ministry of Health and Local Government are satisfied with the level of sanitation in the two institutions. As the institutions finalise their rehabilitation work, follow up inspections will be conducted to ensure that the conditions prevailing in these institutions are conducive for re-opening and continued study by our learners. These inspections, as earlier stated by myself, will continue from time to time to ensure that institutions do not go back into a state of disrepair but that our students conform to public health practices. It is also my aim to ensure that resources that have been provided for this task are prudently used and quality works that will stand a taste of time have been undertaken.

Mr Speaker, allow me to address the staff and student populace through this august House. While the ministry does take cognisance of the fact that most of the facilities that are being replaced have not been maintained for some time, it is disheartening, to note that most of the damage to these facilities have been done through vandalism. Students in the highest institution of learning who are expected to be the echelons of all that is good and who are supposed to set examples to society are the ones who are vandalising the very facilities meant to provide convenient aboard for them. Students continue to overload the facilities available to them through a concept known as 'squatting' where those students who had the opportunity to be given a room charge fellow students to occupy extra space in rooms meant for a limited numbers. In some instances, rooms meant for two students are housing up to eight students at a time. This has continued to put undue strain and pressure on sanitation and other facilities.

Mr Speaker, I therefore, wish to appeal to the student population to take extra effort in caring for the facilities that have been placed at their disposable. I also want to urge all the students to avoid squatting as this strains the facilities. These facilities have been obtained at a huge cost to the Government and taxpayers in order to promote continuity in your learning. Please guard these facilities like you would guard facilities in your own home.

Mr Speaker, as I conclude my Ministerial Statement, allow me to address and put clarity to the remarks by University of Zambia Lecturers and Researchers Union (UNZALARU) who

addressed the press on Wednesday, 13th February, 2018. I must say that I find their remarks unfortunate and misleading. I feel they could have made the statement if;

- (i) they knew the reasons why UNZA did not open in December, 2017 as planned. At no time did the Ministry of Higher Education request for a postponement in the opening of the institution on account of processing of bursaries for students;
- (ii) the cholera epidemic is not an excuse for universities to remain closed. It is real and some families have lost their loved ones as a result of this epidemic; and
- (iii) if the members of the union could go to the hostels and inspect the facilities like most of us have done, they would have appreciated the huge task and work load that people have had to go through to bring those facilities to where they are now.

In fact, if the University of Zambia was still as it was in the past where staff regarded themselves as problem solvers, they would have been in the forefront to help and support the Government.

Mr Speaker, I recall when Cholera first hit Zambia; I was then Head of Pathology and Microbiology at the University Teaching Hospital (UTH). I immediately contacted the Centre for Disease Control (CDC) in Atlanta, Georgia to quickly support a study team that I had put together so that we try and understand the causes of cholera. Through this study, we were able to show that cholera was associated with street vending in places where there were no sanitary facilities. Unfortunately, we have institutions that are supposed to advise Government but keep pointing fingers at the Government and have refused to be part of the problem solving team the way in which other universities conduct themselves.

Mr Speaker, with these extremely few remarks to this august House, I wish to thank you.