

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT
ON THE
RESURGENCE OF THE CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19) IN ZAMBIA

BY
THE MINISTER OF HEALTH (MRS MASEBO), MP

Madam Speaker, I am grateful to be given this opportunity to update the hon. Members of this august House on events threatening the public health security of our people and our country, Zambia. Allow me to emphasise the commitment of Government through the able leadership of His Excellency the Republican President, Mr. Hakainde Hichilema to assure public health security of the country. The Government attaches great importance to securing the health of our people and the national at large. We cannot overstate the fact to ensure that a wealthy nation will require a health nation. I assure this august House and indeed, the nation at large that our national multidisciplinary and multisectoral epidemic response system is intact, functional and effective. Through this system, Madam Speaker, we have recently been able to timely detect and effectively respond to major outbreaks and health threats including the Coronavirus (COVID-19) and cholera.

Madam Speaker this year we have observed an increase in the number of COVID-19 cases as people present at the health care facility with flu like symptoms. This has come at a time when still memories of the terrible effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic are still fresh in the minds and hearts of our people. The lives and livelihoods of many if not all families were severely affected with a high prevalence of COVID-19 infections and related mortality. The devastating impacts of the pandemic on the national and individual economies led to loss of jobs and business. Historically, between March, 2020 and July, 2023, our county recorded 349,224 cases of COVID-19 and 4,072 lives were lost. May the souls of the departed rest in peace.

Madam Speaker, when we took over Government, we enhanced our efforts as a people and Government to protect ourselves through vaccination. At the time, only 3 per of our eligible population were vaccinated against COVID-19. I am happy to say that within five months of us

leading the health sector, we had more than 80 per cent of our eligible population vaccinated thus far, the number of eligible people vaccinated with at least one dose stands at 11.7 million reflecting 96 per cent coverage. Further 9.5 million of our people are fully vaccinated reflecting 87 per cent fully vaccination coverage. 13 per cent of our people have received a booster vaccine dose as well. Our impressive vaccine coverage is well above the fifty-seven average coverage for lower income economies. It is also well above the 67 per cent global average. This is unprecedented and we thank our people and all those involved in our multisectoral manner of responding to public health threats.

Madam Speaker, it is important to note that we have stated several times before that transmission of COVID-19 in Zambia and other countries has not been eliminated. Even when the World Health Organization (WHO) declared an end to COVID-19 as a public health emergency on the 5th of May, 2023, it stressed that it does not mean the disease is no longer a global threat. Therefore, COVID-19 is not yet over. Despite our excellent vaccine coverage, we know that the immunity wanes off over time increasing vulnerability.

We have continued to conduct routine and epidemic preparedness activities. We have introduced new modalities of treatment and monitoring of COVID-19 and other respiratory illnesses including influenza to this effect, we have continued to monitor COVID-19 using the integrated disease surveillance and response system. This has been supplemented by routine testing of at least at risk individuals. Furthermore, we have introduced oral drugs including the famous Paxlovid for treatment of COVID-19 for all high risk individuals. These drugs are given to individuals who test positive to COVID-19 and are at risk of developing severe COVID-19 disease. They are they are available in healthcare facilities and they are free.

Madam Speaker, through our routine COVID-19 surveillance system, the country has seen a steady rise in the number of positive cases of COVID-19 beginning the last week of December, 2023. There has been an increase in COVID-19 positivity in the initial weeks of the year with the total number of suspected cases captured at 17,860 with 3,282 cases having been confirmed to be positive.

Madam Speaker, Copperbelt Province has recorded the highest number of cases with 1,262 case confirmed out of 5,850 tests conducted. This reflects a 21.6 per cent positivity rate. However, in the seventh week of 2024, the positivity rate fell to 16 per cent. The hotspot districts have been Chingola, Chililabombwe, Mufulira and Lusaka.

Madam Speaker, I regret to report that in this same period, we have recorded nine deaths and six were Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) related deaths and three were COVID-19 deaths. The deaths have been in Lusaka, Mansa, Chingola and Mbala. All these individuals were not vaccinated against COVID-19.

Madam Speaker, I am also here today to address the recent rise in COVID-19 cases at Kapiri Mposhi Girls Technical School, Chisamba Boarding School in Central Province and Nchelenge Secondary School in Luapula Province. As of today, 5th March, 2024, a total of 137 learners have tested positive for COVID-19 in these three schools.

Madam Speaker, sixty-four were at Kapiri Mposhi Girls Technical School and fifty-nine at Chisamba Boarding School. It is important to note that, twelve students at Kapiri Mposhi Girls Technical School and twenty-two students at Chisamba Boarding School had previous been vaccinated.

Madam Speaker, two students from Kapiri Mposhi Girls Technical School had been admitted, but had since been discharged. A similar cluster of fourteen COVID-19 cases was observed at Nchelenge Secondary School between the 22nd and 27th February, 2024. I want to assure you that currently all the learners are stable.

Madam Speaker, the Government through the Ministry of Health has taken the following steps to control the situation. We have increased surveillance in all schools. We are isolating infected students in designated spaces. We are providing health education on COVID-19 prevention measures. We are obtaining parental consent to vaccinate learners. We are supplying schools with materials to control the spread of the virus.

Madam Speaker, we have not reached the stage to institute strict public health and social measures. However, we encourage persons with vulnerabilities to get vaccinated, wear masks in crowded places, continuously maintain good hand hygiene and visit the healthcare facilities when unwell. In ensuring preparations for severe cases requiring oxygen support, oxygen supply systems have been improved in our health facilities. We are therefore ready to handle severe respiratory illnesses requiring oxygen therapy.

Madam Speaker, allow me to highlight on what our multi-sectoral and multi-disciplinary response system has put in place during this rise of cases during this rise of cases as follows:

- (a) our COVID-19 centre of excellence at Levy Mwanawasa Teaching Hospital has been re-equipped with both staff and medical supplies to attend to the rising numbers. Similar treatment centres have been re-activated in other provinces;
- (b) disease surveillance has been enhanced to ensure detection and notification of all COVID-19 cases. This includes the use of the electronic platform for tracking of COVID-19 data;
- (c) in-facility COVID-19 testing for all symptomatic individuals has been enhanced. As I speak, all health facilities are testing for COVID-19 among individuals who present with suggestive symptoms;
- (d) genomic sequencing has progressed to ascertain the variant circulating. It is important to note that circulating variant is still the omicron variant with few mutations, not largely different from what has been circulating over time;
- (e) we are also conducting waste-water surveillance to detect the virus that causes COVID-19. This is in collaboration with the Churches Health Association of Zambia (CHAZ) and the Association of Public Health Laboratories (APHL). This program will build up capacity for genomic sequencing to set the stage for integration to cover other significant public health pathogens; and

(f) health promotion messages for COVID-19 have been enhanced using numerous health promotion media. This has further been combined with the cholera prevention and control messaging; and

Madam Speaker, further, we have 3,009,500 doses of the Johnson and Johnson COVID-19 vaccine. We are also expecting 350,000 doses of the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccines next month in April 2024.

Madam Speaker, as I conclude, I would like to reiterate that COVID-19 is not yet over. It is still present with us and has now become endemic in Zambia. Our multi-disciplinary and multi-sectoral epidemic response system is ready to respond to the rising cases. However, the public is encouraged to adhere to public health preventive precautions.

I thank you, Madam Speaker.
