

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

STEPS BEING TAKEN TO ADDRESS ISSUES OF CHILD SAFETY IN SCHOOLS

The Minister of Lands and Natural Resources (Mr Muchima) (on behalf of the Minister of Education (Mr Syakalima)): Madam Speaker, I wish to thank you most sincerely for according me the opportunity to issue a ministerial statement to this august House on the steps being undertaken to ensure learning safety in schools.

Madam Speaker, I also thank Mr Twaambo Mutinta, the Hon. Member of Parliament for Itezhi Tezhi Constituency for raising this matter of urgent public importance. This shows that education provision and learner safety should not be left to the Ministry of Education alone. It is our collective responsibility to manage the affairs of learners, both in school and at home.

Madam Speaker, it is with deep regret that I stand before you to deliver this ministerial statement to the august House regarding the incidents where four secondary school girls were defiled, two Early Childhood Education (ECE) learners died after encountering hazardous objects in their respective school environments and four boys drowned in a pit while originally undergoing cadet drills.

Madam Speaker, allow me to mourn with my fellow parents on the loss of our learners as a result of these school accident related deaths. The accidents that resulted into deaths have greatly undermined my ministry's policy mandate, "Educating our Future".

Madam Speaker, the recent happenings in some of our schools are a source of great concern not only to the general public, but also to the Ministry of Education. The Ministry of Education is entrusted with the responsibility of looking after learners, as the second parent, while they are in schools. The safety of learners and the provision of safe school environments are of paramount importance to the ministry because school is their second home. It is regrettable that human life was lost while in the custody of school authorities. This should not have happened.

Madam Speaker, ministry structures entail that our head teachers take responsibility, as immediate second parents, to ensure the safety of learners while in their custody. The school management is responsible for ensuring and safeguarding a school environment that is child friendly and a safe environment for both learners and staff. This applies to all learning institutions regardless of whether they are public aided, community or private institutions.

The school managers and their management teams are with learners on a daily basis whenever they are in school. It is, therefore, expected that top on their priority list is the safety of learners, as they provide an environment which is safe and conducive for teaching and for learning.

Madam Speaker, the Ministry of Education takes the safety of learners very seriously and as an apex priority. The ministry has put in place various policies and measures to ensure safety of all learners, educators and relevant stakeholders while in schools.

Madam Speaker, schools are critical in instilling discipline and ensuring safety, thus, codes of conduct for learners at all public aided, community and private schools cannot be over emphasised.

Madam, as earlier stated, schools are directly responsible for providing an environment that is conducive to the delivery of quality teaching and learning by, among other things, promoting the rights and safety of all learners, teachers and parents.

Madam Speaker, learners spend more time in school than anywhere else. So, it becomes a vital task for school authorities, teachers and parents to ensure their safety in the best possible way. Therefore, there is a need to make sure that every child is safe within school premises as well as outside.

Madam Speaker, as the Ministry of Education, we have written and communicated to all schools, urging them to follow safety measures which we have put in place. The ministry has also gone a step further to enforce such measures through inspections, which are undertaken by standards officers. This ensures that the measures are adhered to.

Madam Speaker, the recent happenings in our schools have, indeed, been a wakeup call for the ministry. Our officers on the ground were sent to investigate the circumstances under which lives were lost amongst our learners. The ministry is, currently, scrutinising the reports that were received over the incidents and will take appropriate action against head teachers and their management teams that will be found wanting in public schools. For private schools, the ministry will be left with no choice, but to deregister them where negligence is established.

Madam Speaker, allow me to conclude by stating that the ministry will continue, in earnest, to protect the rights of learners in all categories of our schools, as provided for in the Education Act No. 23 of 2011. The success of these efforts relies, largely, on collective efforts of parents, communities and schools to ensure that all learners are safe and realise their full potential whilst in school.

I thank you, Madam Speaker.