

Wednesday, 19th February, 2020

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

ON

CORANAVIRUS OUTBREAK

BY

THE MINISTER OF HEALTH, HON. DR CHILUFYA, MP

The Minister of Health (Dr Chilufya): Mr Speaker, thank you for this opportunity to appraise this august House and through this House the nation on the ongoing coronavirus outbreak.

Sir, the Government of the Republic of Zambia, under the leadership of His Excellency Dr Edgar Chagwa Lungu, is transforming the health sector, repositioning it to attain universal health coverage. Integral to this process is a fundamental component of the health systems model that we are pursuing which is called global health with the dichotomy of health security and health diplomacy.

Mr Speaker, health security focuses on protecting the public from all public health hazards. To this effect, the Zambian Government in its transformational agenda has created a Zambia National Public Health Institute as a disease intelligence arm to enhance preparedness and response to any public health hazards.

Given this background, the Government has put interventions to protect the public, through the Zambia National Public Health Institute and its multi-sectoral approach, from contracting the novel coronavirus. The interventions apply to citizens both at home and abroad.

Sir, on 31st December, 2019, the World Health Organisation (WHO) announced an outbreak of a new strain of coronavirus termed the 2019 novel coronavirus or SARS-CoV-2. This followed a cluster of unusual pneumonia cases reported in Wuhan City, Hubei Province of China. Due to the rapid and wide geographic spread of the virus outside China, aided by the ease of air transport, on 30th January 2020, the WHO declared the outbreak of a global health emergency.

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Mr Speaker, as of 19th February, 2020, the virus has affected more than thirty countries with a total of 74,637 confirmed cases including 2006 deaths recorded globally. On a positive note though, 14,387 have recovered fully.

Sir, China alone has reported about 99 per cent of the confirmed cases and deaths. Africa has recorded and confirmed one case in Egypt and several African countries have investigated suspected cases which have so far tested negative for COVID 19, which is the name that has been given to the novel coronavirus.

Mr Speaker, Zambia has not recorded any case of COVID 19, however, our disease intelligence unit, the Zambia National Public Health Institute, has to date investigated sixteen alerts involving individuals who travelled from China. Laboratory investigations on the respiratory samples from these individuals have all tested negative for the coronavirus. Our surveillance system is active, alert and responding in a timely manner to all threats.

Sir, the virus affects the respiratory system and infected patients present typically with flu-like symptoms such as fever, headache, cough and shortness of breath. In more severe cases, pneumonia ensues with complications that include kidney failure and death particularly in those with compromised immunity or pre-existing medical condition. Currently, the infection has no treatment or vaccine, but early supportive therapy is effective.

Mr Speaker, transmission of the infection can be effectively prevented by observing good hygiene including covering coughs and sneezes with a handkerchief or tissue, regular hand washing with soap and clean water, use of alcohol based sanitizers and maintaining a distance of at least one metre from symptomatic individuals.

Mr Speaker, at country level the Ministry of Health through the Zambia National Public Institute has put in place the following measure:

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- (a) active surveillance at all points of entry and health facilities including screening of all international travellers with a particular focus with those with a history of contact with persons from areas with confirmed cases. Contact details of those from high risk countries are systematically recorded to aid follow up efforts;
- (b) the National Public Health Emergency Operations Centre (PHEOC), at the Zambia National Public Health Institute (ZNPFI) is on higher alert and monitoring the situation as the outbreak evolves and the public shall be kept appraised;
- (c) several strategic and technical meetings with multiple stakeholders including Government ministries and agencies, cooperating partners and civil society, continue to be convened to review our preparedness and our response efforts and to mobilise resources. The meetings are at various levels including:
 - (i) at Central Government level where the Secretary to the Cabinet holds meetings fortnightly with all Permanent Secretaries;
 - (ii) Epidemic Preparedness Prevention and Management Committee meetings;
and
 - (iii) Technical Committee meetings, coordinated by the ZNPFI
- (d) a contingency plan has been developed. This sets out the basis for coordination and resources mobilisation;
- (e) infection prevention measures are being strengthened at all points of entry and in health care facilities, with procurement of additional supplies of best of protective equipment such as gloves, masks, aprons, disinfectants and hygiene supplies;
- (f) isolation facilities to manage suspected cases have been identified in all districts. For Lusaka, this includes Tubalenge Mini Hospital, and should cases swell the

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new wing of the Levy Mwanawasa Teaching Hospital could be used. Further, the Government is in the process of completing the isolation facility in Mwembeshi that has been under construction in readiness for any infectious diseases such Ebola, and this is due to be complete within the next few weeks;

- (g) the country has enhanced its diagnostic capacity for COVID-19, at the Virology Laboratory at the University Teaching Hospital (UTH), the University of Zambia (UNZA), school of medicine and reagents are currently available in the country for testing;
- (h) rapid response teams of health workers at points of entry and other staff have been trained in early detection response and management of potential cases of the COVID-19. This training involves various stakeholders and is continuously taking place;
- (i) community engagement has been enhanced, risk communication is going on through community radio stations, television and other media outlets; and
- (j) a call centre has been established in collaboration with the Disaster Management and Mitigation Unity (DMMU), for the public to obtain information or report alerts related to the Coronavirus. Numbers that can be used to alert have been displayed in various parts, and for the sake the House the three numbers are 0974493553, 0964638726 or 0953898941.

Mr Speaker, Zambia is privileged to host the region collaborating centre of the Africa Disease Control (Africa CDC) Secretariat. Therefore, at continental level the Africa CDC secretariat is working through Zambia to coordinate the regional response. We are providing regular updates and technical support to Member States. As we speak, hon. Ministers from the region are convened in Zambia to discuss a common approach to the Coronavirus and an emergency meeting has been summoned in Addis Ababa over the weekend for all hon. Ministers of Health in Africa to strategise on a sustained response.

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Sir, assessment of national laboratory capacities is ongoing, mobilising of supplies designation of regional reference laboratories and coordinating targeted specialised training, among others. The Africa CDC also holds virtue meetings to update Member States on the evolving outbreak.

Mr Speaker, regarding students and other Zambian nationals who are in China, the Zambian Government continues to provide support through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Zambian Embassy in Beijing, China. Let me be quick to emphasise that so far, no case has been reported amongst Zambians abroad, including within China. All Zambian Students have been accounted for and are safe. The Zambian Government is providing food, masks and other logistics to them. These efforts are also being supplemented by Chinese authorities. Let me assure all parents and the public that the Government is very concerned about the students' welfare and is doing everything possible in conjunction with its colleagues in China to safe guide their well being.

Sir, as I conclude, I wish to appeal to all hon. Member of this House to join in our national efforts by sanitising their constituents, including distribution of health promotion materials, sharing the call centre numbers and encouraging everyone to adhere to personal hygiene practices. I also wish to urge the public to avoid unnecessary travel to areas that have recorded confirmed cases. Those that must travel should refer to travel advisories issued by the Ministry of Health.

Mr Speaker, to further, empower hon. Members of Parliament with Information and materials on this subject, I will seek the indulgence of the hon. Mr Speaker, to have a workshop with the Ministry of Health technical teams.

Sir, the Ministry of Health remains on higher alert and is actively engaging all stakeholders to prepare adequately, prevent, detect and respond quickly to the threat of COVID-19. This is part of the public health security framework that the Patriotic Front (PF) Government under President Lungu has embarked on in its transformational agenda in pursuit of universal health coverage.

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I thank you, Sir.
