

REPUBLIC OF NAMIBIA



**STATEMENT BY DR. KALUMBI SHANGULA, MP, MINISTER OF HEALTH AND
SOCIAL SERVICE ON EXTENSION OF STAGE 3 OF THE COVID-19
RESTRICTIONS AND THE SPECIAL DISPENSATION FOR THE WINDHOEK,
OKAHANDJA AND REHOBOTH LOCAL AUTHORITY AREAS.**

28 AUGUST 2020

WINDHOEK

**Check Against Delivery*

Your Excellency, Dr. Hage G. Geingob, President of the Republic of Namibia,
Hon Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of International Relations and Cooperation
Honourable Ministers
Media Practitioners
Ladies and Gentlemen

1. His Excellency, The President has shared with the nation the COVID-19 response measures that will come into effect on Sunday, the 30 August 2020. I would like to amplify other aspects of our national response that have occupied public discourse in the past weeks. Cabinet has been apprised on these matters.

Safe burials for Covid-19-related deaths

2. The COVID-19 pandemic has affected and changed all aspects of life. This includes the way we grieve the loss and burial of loved ones, especially those who die as a result of the COVID-19. There is now increased fear and anxiety in communities regarding this matter. For this reason, the Ministry of Health and Social Services, has compiled a document, setting out the procedures and legal requirements related to the burials of those whose deaths are attributed to COVID-19.
3. I wish to add that the burial of those who succumb to COVID-19 must be seen in the context of legal requirements regarding the handling of the human remains of those who succumb to all other notifiable infectious diseases¹. In this regard, these requirements relate to the various stages of the process, namely, immediately after death, transportation of the body, the burial or funeral process.
4. During all these stages, the relevant Infection Prevention and Control measures must be adhered to in order to prevent infection and transmission of infectious agents. The relevant legal frameworks in this regard are the provisions of the Public and Environmental Health Act of 2015, the Regulations issued under the State of Emergency declared on account of the COVID-19 pandemic and the applicable Standard Operating Procedures.
5. Taking into account the legal provisions, and the decision that all COVID-19 burials are handled by the State, Cabinet at its sitting this week directed that all the instances involved in the burials of those who succumb to COVID-19, should ensure that:
 - The conduct of the burials must be in strict conformity with the adopted safe burial guidelines;
 - The conduct of safe burials considers the cultural and religious norms of the families, and allow the family to practice the required rituals;
 - The covering of graves with mechanical ploughs be discontinued, to ensure dignified burials for the deceased;
 - The safe burials must not be conducted in haste, but within the time as would be agreed with the families.

¹ Act No. 1 of 2015, S. 20 (1) and 21 (1)

6. The tenets behind the concept of a safe burial is that the handling of the body must be kept to the minimum. In this regard, bodies should be buried closest to where the death occurred. Thus, transportation of bodies is not permissible.
7. The Ministry is fully committed to ensuring that our actions do not cause more anguish to those who are already grieving. It is for this reason that we appeal for full co-operation and understanding of all stakeholders in carrying out this sensitive activity. Our officials will continue to do their best to conduct these processes in a manner that does not lead to feelings of hostility and animosity for families and loved ones of the deceased.
8. At the same time, it is important to note and appreciate that the only reason for the enforcement of these measures is to protect the health and well-being of our nation. Improper handling of the human remains of persons who die of infectious disease can lead to great tragedy. We do not wish that one funeral breeds more funerals. For this reason, everything that needs to be done must be done to prevent any infections. We therefore count on all Namibians for their understanding and co-operation.

Post-humous swabbing of human remains.

9. The other matter which I wish to clarify today relates to the posthumous swabbing of COVID-19 suspected deceased. Given the virulent nature of this new corona virus, it is vital to be certain whether or not a deceased person is infected with COVID-19. This is necessary because the infection status will determine how the body of the deceased will be handled, so that in the case of positive results, infection can be prevented. It is for this reason that, a clinical decision is made either to collect a sample or not from a deceased. This is done on advice from health professionals on the ground. It is however, discouraged that bodies be re-swabbed.

Autopsies

10. With respect to autopsies, our law and recommendations from the WHO do not encourage autopsies, except in highly exceptional circumstances, where it is required to determine the actual cause of death.

Cremation

11. There have also been questions regarding cremation. The bodies of those who succumb to COVID-19 may be cremated. However, this service is currently only available in Windhoek. Cremation is the choice and the responsibility of the family and not the State. The cremated body can be buried in the usual manner.

Additional COVID-19 Sample Collection Points

12. As reported previously, the local COVID-19 testing capacity has increased. However, the Ministry has noted with concern, sporadic congestion at the Robert Mugabe Avenue Clinic, which is dedicated as COVID-19 screening facility. In this regard, the Ministry has implemented measures to decongest the facility, by establishing additional four (4) points around Windhoek where samples for COVID-19 testing can be collected. The

points are located in different constituencies around the City of Windhoek, to minimise long distances that members of the public have to travel to access these services.

13. It is strictly discouraged for employers to send their employees to Robert Mugabe Clinic to collect their results as this has caused congestion at the facility with little regards to public health measures. An alternative way is being explored for disclosure of negative results that will not require the presence of an individual. Positive results will continue to be disclosed in person with accompanying psychosocial support.

COVID-19 Vaccine

14. The subject of a COVID-19 vaccine has also become topical. On this, I wish to state that Namibia has been engaging the international community regarding the development of a COVID-19 vaccine in recent months and weeks. Through the COVAX Facility, we have participated in several meeting and interactions on this matter. More information will be provided to the public in the coming weeks through regular updates on this process. As we pursue this matter, we are motivated by one thing and one thing only: to ensure that when a safe and effective vaccine becomes available, the Namibian people should be able to access it.
15. In the meantime, we have to adjust the way we live. You have noticed that the measures announced by his Excellency are aimed at engendering behavioural change. We need to and we must alter behaviours that propagate the transmission of the coronavirus. We have to take our destiny in our own hands as far as possible. The only “vaccine” currently available is a combination of social distancing, wearing of masks in public places, frequent hand washing and sanitizing. Limiting unnecessary travel makes this “vaccine” efficacious.

COVID-19 Accountability Report

16. Government allocated and availed significant resources for the COVID-19 national preparedness and response, administered mainly by the Ministry of Health and Social Services. The Ministry has finalized a comprehensive Accountability Report which will be submitted to Cabinet. It covers the period from 1st April 2020 to 24 August 2020.
17. Finally, I wish to inform the public that we are organising a panel discussion on burials and other related matters which will take at the Communication Centre, where more information will be given and where members of the public will be able to phone in and ask questions.

I thank you.