

REPUBLIC OF NAMIBIA



MINISTRY OF HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES

**STATEMENT BY DR KALUMBI SHANGULA, MP, MINISTER OF HEALTH AND
SOCIAL SERVICES AT THE 2021 WORLD AIDS DAY COMMEMORATION**

1 DECEMBER 2021

OUTJO, KUNENE

**Check against delivery*

Director of Ceremonies, Mr Thomas Shapumba, Regional Health Director for Kunene
Hon Marius Sheya, Governor of Kunene Region
Your Worship the Mayor of Outjo, Ms Sieglinde Amamus
Ms Jessica Long, Charge de Affaires of the Embassy of the United States of America
Dr Alti Zwandor, UNAIDS Country Director
Mr. Sandi Tjaronda representing Civil Society Organizations
Senior Government Officials
Mr Albert Aib of the Traditional Authority
Local Constituencies Counsellors
Media Practitioners
Ladies and gentlemen!

1. We have converged here at the Town of Outjo to join others around the globe to commemorate the World AIDS Day 2021. This is a day set aside specially to mobilize the people of the world to focus attention on one of the most devastating pandemics to have faced humanity in the past 100 years. It is also a day to reflect on the gains made, the successes recorded and the impediments encountered in HIV/AIDS response. Above all, it is a day we remember and honour those who have lost their lives due to AIDS or its related complications. At the same time, we celebrate the brave men, women and children who have prevailed, fought back and survived illnesses related to HIV infection. We honour them and thank them for the tenacity and bravery for fighting on and for never giving up.
2. There was a time when HIV/AIDS was regarded as a public health threat. Infections were high, hospitalizations had skyrocketed and the country was losing lives on a daily basis due to HIV complications. We had to change course and act decisively. We adopted deliberate multipronged policies to combat the scourge. We mobilised resources locally and externally. We engaged in aggressive messaging and creation of community awareness about the dangers of HIV infections. We also focussed on addressing stigma and discrimination associated with HIV/AIDS. Programmes and interventions such as Prevention of Mother to Child HIV Transmission (PMTCT); Test and Treat; Index Testing and others became standard practice in our response. At the centre of it all, has been the collection of data and using such data for planning and identification of areas where targeted interventions are needed.
3. These interventions have served our country well. They have enabled us to help many Namibians rebuild their lives after successful treatment and care following HIV infections. Today, HIV infection has become just another manageable chronic condition. This is largely due to advances in science which has produced effective therapies, greater adherence to treatment, and the reduction in stigma and discrimination. The interventions by Government with the support of our development cooperating partners have indeed made it possible to save thousands of lives and change the trajectory of HIV/AIDS in our country. The Government has invested and expended significant amounts of resources to combat the scourge of HIV/AIDS in the country. In the area of procurement of anti-retroviral medicines alone, Government

spends in excess of N\$200 million every year. These investments have produced the required results as witnessed through the reduction in the number of deaths in Namibia due to HIV/AIDS complications.

4. It is indeed pleasing that Namibia today proudly stands as one of the few countries that has achieved the 90-90-90 global targets to reach HIV/AIDS epidemic control. In this regard, we must remind ourselves not to lose focus, but to continue strengthening our efforts and to realize the revised 95-95-95 fast track target, reach epidemic control and bring an end to HIV/AIDS as a public health threat. We will continue to closely monitor the HIV prevalence ratio in our country that currently stands at 8.3% of the general population according to statistics from the Namibia Population-based HIV Impact Assessment (NAMPHIA) conducted three years ago.
5. In the past two years, we have experienced unprecedented challenges to our health systems with the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic. The intersection of HIV/AIDS and Covid-19 pandemics has detrimental effect on the control of the former. Certain public health measures required to control the spread of Covid-19 have led to societal restrictions, including lockdowns and curfews that have negatively impacted the economy, education and health. In addressing the COVID-19 pandemic we had to be innovative and nimble on our feet to ensure that the public health system was not overwhelmed by this new pandemic.
6. In light of the challenges occasioned by the COVID-19 pandemic, we acknowledge the efforts and dedication of our health care workers who have remained resolute and stood firm, ensuring that the good work done in the fight against HIV/AIDS and other diseases over the years, is not reversed. Although there were unfortunate losses, our health workers have achieved commendable and impressive milestones. This gives us confidence and assurance that we can and we will overcome the COVID-19 pandemic and that the HIV and AIDS epidemic will soon be totally vanquished.
7. One of the challenges we have faced over the years relates to achieving our targets among children living with HIV. One of the factors is the limited range of paediatric ART formulations and poor adherence. In order to address these gaps, the Ministry has started transitioning eligible children on ART to the new Paediatric Dolutegravir-based formulation which is currently the most effective ARV medicine available in the world. In addition, the Ministry has introduced a programme called the Namibia Adolescent Treatment Support (NATS), which is an adolescent peer-led intervention to support treatment, care, and adherence to medication amongst children living with HIV.
8. Although there are challenges in achieving some of these targets, we have, to date, enrolled more than 93% of eligible adults and eighty-one percent (81%) of children, to HIV Anti-Retroviral treatment. These successes were recorded because of the robust strategies and programmes that the government and its development partners such as PEPFAR, Global Fund, the UN family, Civil Society Organization and Non-Governmental Organization have put in place.

9. The Combination Prevention Package on HIV remains one of the most important components of our national HIV/AIDS strategy. Equally important, as part of the response we are specifically targeting Adolescent Girls and Young Women to minimize incidence and risks related to HIV. The Ministry and its partners continue to pool resources to strengthen the scale-up of prevention services country-wide. These include the rollout of condoms, HIV testing, Voluntary Medical Male Circumcision and Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PreEP) to prevent new cases, improve health outcomes, reduce HIV related disparities, and attain a future free of HIV.
10. I take this opportunity to commend our hard-working community health workers who go the extra mile to ensure that the public is well-informed on the risks of HIV and related diseases. As frontline workers, they have committed their efforts passionately during the Covid-19 pandemic so that the public is educated, informed and mobilized to access HIV related health services and to protect themselves against HIV infections. The Ministry of Health and Social Services is working hard to ensure that patients receive high quality and effective care when they visit health care facilities. This is key to achieving Universal Health Coverage (UHC).
11. We recognise the special circumstances of at-risk populations such as people living with HIV in the context of COVID-19. The Ministry of Health and Social Services has ensured that they are prioritized for services such as vaccination against COVID-19. As part of this initiative, 4 923 people living with HIV have been vaccinated at ART sites during their routine consultations. COVID-19 vaccination services are available at this event today. I encourage those not vaccinated yet to do so today.
12. There is a myth going around that Covid-19 goes away during the hot season. This is not true. The second wave of Covid-19 peaked on the 13 December 2020 when we registered 683 new cases. During that period, Namibia experienced high daily temperatures. It follows therefore that Covid-19 transmission takes place anytime, under any weather condition. The intensity of transmission is driven by human behaviour, by human interaction especially when the interaction is taking place in a non immune population like the Namibian population. Without high vaccination coverage, Namibia can expect a resurgence of high transmission.
13. Of late we have heard a lot of the new Covid-19 variant which was initially detected in our neighbouring countries of Botswana and South Africa. The announcement of this variant, which was baptised by WHO as Omicron, sent hysterical reaction in Western countries, despite the fact that they themselves are experiencing a resurgence of new infections compared to Southern Africa.
14. This variant is of concern because it has some mutations that may have an impact on how it behaves. We are enhancing advance surveillance and sequencing, and will share genome sequences results with public databases, and report cases to WHO, while also continue to implement effective public health measures. We must understand that the more COVID-19 circulates, the more opportunities the virus has to change, the more

mutations we will see. The most important thing people can do is reduce their risk of exposure to the virus. We have been testing for this variant in Namibia. So far, we have not detected any. I can assure the nation that the moment we detect it, we shall inform the public promptly. In the meantime, let us remain calm and not entertain unofficial source of information that seeks to cause panic, fear and despondency.

15. An effective response to the dual pandemics requires an unprecedented coordinated and collaborative global effort to operationalise evidence-based interventions. The most definitive approach to these two pandemics is the roll-out of safe and effective Covid-19 vaccines. Vaccines are one of the most effective medical tools ever created. Vaccines save more lives than any other medical or public health innovation. It is estimated that vaccines alone save between 2-3 million lives a year.
16. Let us all commit to ensure that we do our part to stay safe and prevent HIV transmissions. We must all come together in solidarity and kick AIDS out of Namibia. We must continue the fight for every Namibian to have access to quality health care, to End AIDS and to End the Pandemics.
17. I take this opportunity to wish everyone in advance, a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year. Let us celebrate the festivities in a safe environment and in a responsible manner! This year our healthcare workers went through the most challenging time of caring for those who are afflicted by Covid-19. They did a great job. Let us reward them during this festive season with good rest for them, a period free of Covid-19 patients.

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