

REPUBLIC OF NAMIBIA



**RESPONSE BY DR. KALUMBI SHANGULA TO QUESTIONS RAISED IN THE
NATIONAL ASSEMBLY BY HON. DUDU MURORUA (UDF).**

25 FEBRUARY 2021

NATIONAL ASSEMBLY

**Check Against Delivery.*

Honourable Speaker
Hon Members

I rise to respond to questions posed by Hon. Dudu Murorua, seeking clarification on matters related to Namibia's COVID-19 response and preparedness, specifically on the burials of persons whose deaths are attributed to COVID-19.

The Public and Environmental Health Act of 2005 enjoins the Ministry of Health and Social Services to promote, protect and preserve public health. Section 29, thereof grants the Minister certain powers to put measures in place to manage public health emergencies, including the outbreaks of notifiable infectious diseases.

Hon. Murorua asked why there was a recommendation that COVID-19 graves should be located 50 meters away from existing graves.

I take it that when I announced the new Standard Operating Procedures for safe burials on the 3 February 2021, many people were still on leave and might have missed the information. The question of the Hon Murorua has been overtaken by events. Also, yesterday, during the 25 Covid-19 Public Briefing at State House, I announced further amendments to the burials protocol. Nonetheless, I proceed to respond to the questions as put.

Our first priority is to ensure that we protect public health at all cost. It is for this reason that human remains of persons who succumb to notifiable infectious diseases are buried in a specific manner, known as a safe burial. Since COVID-19 is a novel virus and not much was known at the beginning of the pandemic, the initial Standard Operating Procedure on the burial of COVID-19 remains indicated that such grave should be located at least 50 meters from existing graves. The imperative was to protect public health and protect people. With evolving information, this requirement has since been done away with. However, I hasten to add that burials involving notifiable infectious diseases, including COVID-19 require that effective infection control practices are adhered to without fail. This is to ensure that one funeral does not breed or give rise to other funerals, because it has been proven that public gatherings such as funeral have become super spreading events for COVID-19 infections. We must do everything we can to prevent this from happening, hence the measures put in place with respect to COVID-19 burials.

Further, the Honourable Member also sought clarity regarding the storage of corpses of COVID-19 and those that are not COVID related in the same mortuaries.

The storage of human remains of persons who succumb to notifiable infectious diseases, including COVID-19, is conducted under strict precautions that are informed by the imperatives of infection prevention and control. These precautions are taken to avoid possible contamination or spreading of infections from such human remains.

When a person dies from a notifiable infectious disease, such as COVID-19, the human remains are placed in a three-layered body bag to prevent contamination by handlers in the mortuary. In several healthcare facilities, mobile mortuaries dedicated to COVID-19 related corpses have been procured. Where there are no dedicated mortuaries, precautions are taken by putting the COVID-19 corpses in the lower cabinet of the mortuary to prevent seepage from the bodies from contaminating other corpses. The risk of contaminating other bodies is almost zero.

Further, Hon Murorua asked whether the WHO recommendations differ from country to country? In this regard, I wish to inform as follows.

The World Health Organisation issues universal guidelines and recommendations to all countries. However, countries adopt the recommendations depending on their unique settings and practices. In some countries, burials are strictly attended by family members only. In others, one needs an invitation to attend a burial. Again, in some countries, burials are done within 24 hours. In the case of Namibia, burials are attended by an unlimited number of people. It follows therefore that there can never be a universal protocol that is applicable to all the burials in the world.

Some cultural practices that involve touching the body of COVID 19 corpse or cutting off some parts pose a risk of COVID-19 infection and as a result Namibia recommends that such practices should not be done which is in line with WHO recommendations. Also, the use of appropriate Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) by trained persons is recommended when handling COVID-19 corpses. Safe burials are not new to Namibia. Safe burials have been conducted in Namibia before in respect of deaths due to Crimean-Congo haemorrhagic fever.

I wish to thank Hon. Murorua for raising the questions and trust that I have sufficiently ventilated them and provided the clarifications sought.

I thank you, Honourable Speaker.

