

- Honourable Deputy Minister Dr. Joe Phaahla
- WHO Director General Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus
- WHO Regional Director for Africa Dr. Matshidiso Moeti
- WHO Country Representative Dr. Owen Kaluwa
- Director General for Health Dr. Sandile Buthelezi
- All senior officials from WHO
- All Senior Officials from Department of Health
- Members of the Media
- And a special greeting to the WHO Surge team

It is my humble honour today to officially welcome the World Health Organisation Surge Team.

South Africa is truly blessed to have this calibre of expertise in its midst as we continue to be at war with the Coronavirus.

Although South Africa shares a long and rich kinship with the WHO, the significance of this bond has never been more highlighted than during in this cataclysmic period of our era.

Indeed we have a proud track record of partnership with the WHO. Looking back a decade or so, one can recall some instances where WHO heeded to our call and supported us in staging responses that mitigated devastating effects of public health emergencies.

Between 2000 and 2002 we had a major cholera outbreak, with cases exceeding 100 000 in KZN alone. It was with the help of

WHO that an effective response was staged and the case fatality rate was kept at less than 0.5%. The water and sanitation hygiene (WASH) lessons learnt and systems developed became evident in 2003, 2008 and 2018. In all instances, with the deployment of WHO expertise, South Africa managed to stop the epidemics with case fatality rates of around 0.5%.

Not so long ago during the listeriosis outbreak of 2017/ 2018, WHO provided support to the multi-sectoral incident management team (IMT) and co-developed an updated Listeriosis Emergency Response Plan. In the same year, WHO sent a delegation of 16 delegates to make an intervention through the WHO Listeriosis Regional Technical Meeting which took place in Johannesburg from 19-21 April 2018.

The FIFA 2010 World Cup coincided with the global H1N1 outbreak and this could have threatened the ability to stage this historic football event. With the help of WHO Mass Gathering Protocols were adopted which allowed us to proceed with the tournament.

The WHO also provided leadership and technical support to the Presidency and the National Department of Health in the successful organization of Presidential Health Summit. The Presidential Health Compact, emanating from the Summit, is now a guiding blueprint

for the attainment of quality health care for all South Africans and forms a solid basis for the realization of Universal Health Coverage.

The *Control of Tobacco Products and Electronic Delivery Systems Bill*, approved by the Cabinet and published for public comment until Thursday 9 August 2018, is explicitly supported by the WHO. It is consistent with South Africa's obligations under the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control and brings our country back to the forefront of international tobacco control best practice.

Whilst the WHO name was well known and trusted it was not usually part of everyday civilian conversation- now the WHO is part of our work language, our dinner conversations, our social media banter, and a lot of arguments!

And so today it feels more like welcoming family members into our family crisis- the Coronavirus has indeed forced us to find meaning in the term "global village." I pay tribute to the men and women of this organisation and the leadership that has been shown during this unprecedented time.

You are all most warmly welcome to our country. I am sure that you will find a motivated, tenacious, energetic and resilient people to inspire the work that you will be doing. I would also like to extend my gratitude to Dr Moeti and Dr Mike Ryan for the support and guidance that the surge team will receive from yourselves through

virtual consultations and I am particularly grateful the Dr Moeti can be here with us on South African soil for for a while.

History is peppered with incidences of major disease outbreaks- some of which obliterated nations and cultures and in other instances changed the course of history forever. The devastations of past pandemics are part of our fabric even in modern times- so many of our experiences, customs and traditions were forged during these times of crisis.

One of the earliest records can be found in Hamin Mangha- a 5000 year old archaeological site in north eastern China where a mass grave was discovered. Scientific evidence suggests that this prehistoric village, and a nearby village, was obliterated by a plague of unknown origin.

Artefacts from archaeological sites show some advancement in case management and containment measures with antiseptic lime being discovered covering the bodies at those sites and clear evidence of organized cremation of bodies.

In some instances these plagues exposed the dark side of humanity, sometimes causing the permanent extinction of indigenous populations. The American Plagues of the 16th century that were imported by European explorers led to the collapse of the Inca and Aztec civilizations. Ravaged by disease they were unable

to withstand the Spanish forces of 1519 and 1532 that subsequently colonized the region.

When Philadelphia went through a yellow fever epidemic in 1793 it was assumed that black slaves were immune and so abolitionists called for them to be recruited to nurse sick patients.

Before the advent of Coronavirus, South Africa was already faced with a triple burden of HIV, TB and non-communicable diseases. Our people were highly anxious about the stories they were hearing from China and there was great concern about what would happen to millions of South Africans who suffer from these ailments.

When we consider the socio-economic devastation pandemics can cause, it is without doubt that one of humanities greatest achievements was the establishment of the World Health Organisation in 1948. It is from this organisation that one of the most important definitions of our civilization was forged: the WHO defines health as “a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of [disease](#) or infirmity.” This definition was a paradigm shift in the way health care would be approached in the 20th century and would push us in the direction of realizing the aspirations of universal health coverage.

We have seen from history that failure to identify and contain the spread of the virus can literally wipe out entire nations. Indeed the origins of the WHO began as they inherited projects from the Health

Organisation of the League Of Nations specific to **epidemic** control, **quarantine** measures, and **drug** standardization. This heralded an era of enhanced co-operation between nations to safeguard the health and safety of all people of the world.

History has shown us that, whilst disease can and does touch everyone, it causes most devastation, even elimination, amongst the poor, the vulnerable and the oppressed, in particular oppressed indigenous peoples. Disease can be used to further subjugate and expose vulnerable populations and it can be used to advance nefarious political and economic agendas. It will expose a nation's weaknesses and drive existing wedges into deep craters between members of society- divisions that can sometimes never be bridged. As I speak of these phenomena, it is stunning to think that we have already witnessed all of these unfortunate sequelae in 9 short months.

Added to this have been some distinguishing features of the advent of this virus in current times. Advancements in communication and exchange of information has led to unprecedented levels of scrutiny on political leaders, the health care sector, academics, scientists and even civilians. Increased connectivity ease of travel and densely populated urban settling have seen an unprecedented spread of the virus.

However, I believe that the stewardship of the World Health Organisation has ensured that we are able to take lessons from

history and tell a better story of the way in which we have handled the Coronavirus globally and locally

What I am most proud of is that the WHO has remained committed to all nations despite some being critical and even withdrawing sorely needed funding and resources. It is unfortunately a sad fact of life that times like these bring out the best and the worst in us.

As political volatility escalates around the world, it is very telling that during our time of most need, we did not hesitate to call on the World Health Organisation to bolster our efforts and the World Health Organisation did not hesitate to respond to that call.

On the eve of the WHO announcement of a Public Health Emergency of International Concern, I made a commitment to the country that we were adequately prepared for active surveillance, early detection, isolation and case management, contact tracing and prevention of onward spread of Coronavirus infection, and to share full data with the World Health Organisation (WHO). Since then we have received continued support on many levels from the WHO- it has been through through robust scientific engagement with this organisation that we have been able to make governmental undertakings to manage the COVID-19 outbreak.

We have received queries why there would be a need for the surge team if we are past the surge. I would like to emphasize for our people that we are not past anything: we are still the country with

the fifth highest positive cases in the world. We are only now considering easing some of the restrictions and we are still to cross that critical juncture of re-opening of our borders. Apart from the impact on the health system that this virus has had, we are still faced with the devastation it has caused in our social lives, our well being, the economy and the environment.

With the threat of resurgence remaining very real, we would not want to repeat recent history witnessed in some countries and allow a second surge to wreak even further destruction. As the President has repeatedly said- “we need all hands on deck” to see us through this storm.

16 team members have now arrived in the country and when the team is complete there will be 43. Those that are already with us have begun an orientation period to ensure there is optimal alignment of programmes.

The work of battling a pandemic does not begin and end and therefore we will be encouraging fluidity and agility and welcome the fact that they will be looking at our situation with fresh eyes and may be able to identify blindspots or offer a perspective we might not have considered. There is a broad range of expertise in this team including:

- Surveillance and streamlining of epidemiological systems
- WHO global COVID-19 response guidelines;



- Case management,
- Expertise in Communications and Stakeholder engagement to increased community buy-in of public health measures.

South Africa and many other nations have shown that it is possible, through multi-sectoral collaboration, to slow down the rate of infection and rebuild livelihoods after the initial devastation. With this team buttressing our efforts we should further look for opportunities to emancipate the impoverished, the oppressed and the vulnerable using innovations that have emanated from the crisis.

If history will be altered, it should not be because some won and some lost because of the pandemic- it should be that we all held each others hands and pulled each other through the storm. That is what will set us apart from our forefathers.

I therefore urge all professionals, academics, frontline workers and members of society to embrace this intervention that the World Health Organization is making

Now is the time to harness the energy and resources that are being directed towards our public health strategies to drive innovation that accelerates our pathway towards Universal Health Coverage.

I thank you

