



MINISTERS BRIEFING ON GOVERNMENT INTERVENTIONS REGARDING FOODBORNE ILLNESSES AND ILLICIT TRADE

Date: 21 November 2024

We have convened this media briefing as Ministers tasked with implementing the interventions announced by the President on Friday, 15 November 2024, to provide progress made in this regard.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT INTERVENTIONS

The implementation of the standard by-laws for rural and township economies, which among others, advocate for mandatory proper waste disposal and recycling practices to ensure that business areas are free from obstructions and pollutants will be expedited. This will also go a long way in dealing with the issue of rat infestations in our communities, which gives rise to the harmful use of dangerous and banned chemicals like pesticides.

Several Municipal Councils around the country have already adopted standard by-laws. We urge other Municipalities who are yet to adopt the by-laws to urgently do so, to assist the compliance process and save lives.

The National Disaster Management Centre has, in terms Section 23 of the Disaster Management Act 57 of 2002, classified foodborne illnesses as a national disaster. In addition, the classification, hereby

- (i) encourages organs of state, the private sector and communities to improve their practices of risk avoidance through their adherence to food safety legislation, standards and procedures.
- (ii) encourage individuals to comply with applicable business registration legislation, standards and procedures
- (iii) recommend that the National Executives, respective Provincial Executives, and the respective Municipal Councils implement a multisectoral relief and rehabilitation plan to deal with the effects of the disaster.

HEALTH INTERVENTIONS

The appointment of health experts who will serve in the Ministerial Advisory Committee is at an advanced stage and this team will be announced in the next few days. The committee will develop medium-to-long-term prevention measures to curb the incidents of foodborne illnesses in the country.

The directive to notify the deaths of patients 12 years and below is a critical one and will be implemented as a matter of urgency. This will help us to understand the burden of disease and the population at risk in real time instead of waiting for a long period of time.

The Department of Health is currently amending the Notifiable Medical Conditions Regulations such that the death of anybody 12 years and younger becomes notifiable. The Regulations may be published based on the State of Disaster being declared by the Minister of COGTA.

The issue of the shortage of environmental health inspectors is receiving urgent attention to capacitate all districts and metropolitan municipalities to effectively enforce inspections across the country.

SUPPORT TO SMALL BUSINESSES

The setting up of the joint fund (R500 million) to support townships and rural businesses including community convenience shops has already begun. The departments responsible for the joint fund are working on the guidelines and standard operating procedures on utilization and accountability of the fund which will be completed in the next two weeks.

In the short term, approved rural and township businesses will be supported through this fund to improve their infrastructure, regulatory compliance and capacity building. The operational fund application and disbursement process will commence as soon as the registration process is completed and will be subjected to ongoing auditing processes as an early warning system against potential anomalies and fraudulent activities.

The qualifying criteria is also very specific that the owner of the business must be a South African citizen operating within the borders of the country and serving local communities. The business must be registered with local municipality in accordance with the relevant by-laws and have valid registration with SARS. Funding will prioritise entrepreneurs between the ages of 18 and 35-years with much emphasis on female-owned businesses.

The Department of Small Business Development has started a process to create a nerve centre with geo-mapping capacity to centralise data on the township and rural economy. A national database of registered small businesses and spaza shops will strengthen our capacity to regulate the sector and to ensure effective compliance to avoid the recurrence of future outbreaks.

REGISTRATION OF SMALL BUSINESSES AND SPAZA SHOPS

We would like to emphasize that the law allows every shop owner who is a legitimate trader and meets the legal requirements to own a business in the Republic, to register a business and trade. In processing these applications for registration, the government will make every effort to ensure that account is taken of every legal prescript that allows people to do business in the country.

We are concerned about surfacing allegations that suggest that some South Africans are assisting illegal foreign nationals to fraudulently comply with the requirements for registration. This is clear fronting, and we would like to warn everyone who is involved in this illegal activity to stop. The Immigration Act prohibits any person from aiding, abetting, assisting or enabling an illegal foreigner to obtain a licence on his or her behalf, to conduct any business or carry on any profession or occupation.

Landlords are obliged by law to ensure that those who rent their premises to conduct businesses, comply with the provisions of the Immigration Act and the standard by-laws regulating local business in the municipalities in which they operate.

Stories are also doing the rounds on social media and other communication platforms about government officials who are allegedly involved in fraudulent and corrupt activities in the registration process of small businesses and spaza shops. The law enforcement agencies will clamp down heavily on extortionists who want to use this process to enrich themselves. Members of the public are urged to report any suspected corrupt activities through the National Anti-Corruption Hotline 0800 701 701.

We want to appeal to the members of the public not to disturb the process of registration by blocking certain shop owners from participating in the process, this includes conducting unlawful inspections by members of the public, and other unauthorized bodies. Lawful joint inspections are ongoing across the country, led by multi-disciplinary teams comprising of experts and officials from various government departments, state bodies and law enforcement agencies.

These inspections include the food value chain right from manufacturing, wholesale and transport, and the retail sector to monitor and enforce norms and standards for food safety. For example, between 8-20 November 2024, the Counterfeit, Contraband and Illicit Goods Operations have seized various items such as illicit pharmaceutical products, clothing etc, to the value of R4.9 million in the Western Cape and Gauteng provinces. The unit has also seized cash to the value of R417 000 and imposed fines for various contraventions to the tune of R6 000. In KZN, the law enforcement has uncovered three warehouse wick contained counterfeit food, clothing, pesticides, large amounts of expired food and pesticides imported for sale in the country estimated to a value of R800m.

In the Northern Cape alone, over 26 spaza shops have been closed due to several reasons including non-compliance, operating without valid licenses and poor hygiene

practices. Our immediate concern is the delay in the release of the laboratory test results. In this regard, an amount of R15 million has been allocated towards rapid testing of suspected contaminated food products as part of efforts to improve the turnaround time of laboratory test results.

MULTI DISCIPLINARY INSPECTIONS

These inspections will be complemented by nationwide cleanup campaigns, which have already kicked off in the province of Gauteng and will be rolled out to other hotspots areas and the entire country. To succeed in this effort to rid our environment of rat infestations, and other waste management challenges, we need a sustained partnership between government and society approach. It is in our hands to make our communities cleaner, healthier, safer liveable environments.

In the next few days, the Department of Agriculture will conduct inspections at all five registered manufacturers of Terbufos to ascertain controls and to determine if markers are put into locally produced products to distinguish between illegally imported and locally produced chemicals. The Department will also strengthen the work of the Biosecurity efforts, to support the control of the entry of products, organisms and other harmful biological products at the ports of entry.

We have established partnerships with the private sector on waste management and this will involve the covering of transportation costs of dangerous goods and contaminated foodstuff, and treatment of disposal sites. In this regard, Croplife will provide its licensed vehicles for transportation of dangerous goods to A-thermal disposal facilities while Enviroserv will be involved in transporting contaminated foodstuff to their legal landfill (Class A).

Our learners at school have been the most vulnerable and affected population group in this outbreak. As a result, the Department of Basic Education has already issued a circular to all provincial Education Departments and all schools on best practice protocols for preventing and managing foodborne illnesses within schools.

In addition, a process, involving the Department of Basic Education, Health and School Governing Bodies, to review and update the guidelines for schools on the management of suppliers of foodstuffs to public schools has commenced. This work will be completed by the beginning of the new school year.

It is important to note that most the incidents relating to foodborne illnesses have not emanated from the National School Nutrition Programme. DBE will work hard to insulate the NSNP.

It has also come to our attention that unscrupulous shop owners who avoid inspections are now dumping contaminated foodstuffs in unauthorized landfill sites and open spaces. This exposes communities, especially children and waste pickers who live and play next to these sites, and sometimes pick up these contaminated food products for consumption. Some of these contaminated foodstuffs are repackaged and sold back to communities.

We urge communities not to pick and consume these unsafe products as they compromise their health. Our law enforcement agencies will act decisively against those shop owners who illegally dumped unsafe foodstuffs.

PUBLIC EDUCATION AND AWARENESS

With regards to the much-needed Public Education Campaign, work has already commenced using both public and private communication platforms countrywide as well as multiple social partnerships. This campaign draws on the rich lessons and partnerships developed during South Africa's COVID-19 and vaccination programmes.

Government communication platforms have begun sharing education about food preparation and safety; tips for the transportation, handling and safe storage of food; safety tips for food vendors, as well as information on which chemicals are illegal in South Africa but also how dangerous chemicals are to be stored and handled.

Information is available on all government and various non-government digital communication platforms including Facebook, TikTok, X and WhatsApp. An extensive media engagement plan is underway in partnership with both mainstream commercial and the rich network of community media, countywide. We thank members of the media here today as well as across the entire country for your willingness to partner with us with this key national effort.

Over the past week, Government Communications (GCIS) through its provincial and district teams and their partners, have already been able to implement 145 outreach activities including community activations and outreaches as well as community media engagements. We are particularly grateful to the various organizations who are participants in the National Communication Partnership (NCP) who have come forward to partner with the government in amplifying this education campaign.

From the private sector side, South African retailers this past week launched a country-wide campaign against illicit goods. This initiative led by the Consumer Goods Council (GCC) of South Africa will roll out the education about food labelling and how to check if the food you are buying is fit for consumption. We appreciate such efforts to expand our communication efforts and call upon all social partners to join this effort.

We remind South Africans that if you see any fake or expired foodstuffs being sold in your communities, please report this immediately to the National Consumer Commission on 012 065 1940, the National Consumer Commission is engaging mobile network operators to zero-rate the number so that it does not cost to the callers.

We are concerned about the deliberate spread of false and misleading information on social media, which has got potential to cause public panic and confusion and incite violence. Thus, we urge members of the public to refrain from sharing unverified information. Misinformation can be reported to the National Helpline at 0800 012 322 or info@health.gov.za.

The NATJOINTS is coordinating government response to these foodborne illnesses and illicit trade. President has appointed the District Development Champions who are part of the National Executive and will work jointly with Provjoints to ensure compliance. We will keep the public informed through regular updates using different communication platforms.