

SPEECH BY DR LUIS GOMES SAMBO, WHO REGIONAL DIRECTOR FOR AFRICA AT THE OPENING OF THE AFRICAN CONFERENCE ON PANDEMIC INFLUENZA A (H1N1) 2009

JOHANNESBURG, SOUTH AFRICA, 11-13 AUGUST 2009

- Honourable Minister of Health of South Africa,
- Honorable Ministers of Health of participating countries,
- Senior Officials from Ministries of Health,
- Excellencies Members of the Diplomatic Corps and Representatives of International Cooperation Agencies,
- Dear Representatives of Public Health Laboratories and Research Institutions,
- Distinguished Experts and Participants,
- Dear colleagues,
- Members of the press,
- Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honor for me to address this distinguished audience at the occasion of the African Conference on Pandemic *Influenza A H1N1 2009*.

I would like first of all to express my sincere gratitude to the Government of the Republic of South Africa for accepting to host this important event and providing support for its organization. Honorable Minister, Dr Aaron Motsoaledi, thank you very much for your much-appreciated hospitality.

I wish to extend a special welcome to the Honorable Ministers, Heads of country delegations, Representatives of Partner agencies, Research institutions, and other distinguished participants that accepted my invitation to this forum.

As you are all aware, during the past five months governments and health experts around the globe have been on high alert following reports of the first confirmed cases of *Influenza A H1N1 2009*. Within a short span of time it has become a pandemic. Currently over 166 countries worldwide have been affected with about 174,913 confirmed cases and 1,411 deaths. The African Region, the last to be affected amongst the 6 WHO regions, has of today 1464 confirmed cases and 2 confirmed deaths reported by 16 countries out of 46.

- Honorable Ministers,
- Distinguished participants,

The *Influenza A H1N1 2009 Pandemic*, initially called “SWINE FLU” is now spreading amongst communities worldwide and is therefore a new global public health issue of great concern that calls for an appropriate global response.

Current global efforts involving WHO are mainly focused on aspects such as:

- *Mitigation of the effects of the pandemic* through increased public awareness, preventive measures, case management, multi-sectoral response and global solidarity;
- *Disease Surveillance* and enforcement of the *International Health Regulations*. In the current globalised world where increased travel has been associated with spread of diseases and epidemics, the importance of international health regulations cannot be underestimated. Your compliance with the IHR has to contribute to strengthening our collective ability to track, analyze and respond effectively to the pandemic.
- Availability and *access to medicines* – Tamiflu and Personal Protection Equipment;
- *Vaccine research, development* and production.

We are still learning about the severity of the *Influenza A H1N1 2009 Pandemic*. The impact of the novel H1N1 Influenza virus in African populations has yet to be seen and will probably depend on potential changes in its severity. We therefore need more knowledge about the epidemiological, clinical and virological characteristics of the disease. That is why we are calling for more investment in research to address the knowledge gaps and enable a more appropriate response.

- Honorable Ministers,
- Distinguished participants

The current public health context in the African Region is still dominated by the very high burden of diseases, very high maternal mortality rates and high infant mortality. Sub-Saharan Africa is hosting 66% of the burden of HIV/AIDS pandemic, 31% of Tuberculosis burden and 86% of the total burden of Malaria. This region is prone to recurrent epidemics such as hemorrhagic fevers, meningitis and water-borne diseases for example cholera. Therefore, the emergence of the *Influenza A H1N1 2009 Pandemic* puts an additional pressure on health systems of African countries already stretched with other competing public health priorities. We should not distort the public health focus in the African region but rather accommodate the response to this emerging threat in health sector reforms and the strengthening of health systems.

The African Region reported its first case on 18th June 2009. Prior to that WHO had been working with countries to update their preparedness and response plans and the provision of technical support and various materials. In order to further heighten this support we organized this conference to update country participants on the epidemiology of the *Influenza A H1N1 2009 Pandemic*, to review the process of regional and national preparedness and response and provide an opportunity for sharing experiences among countries. I also expect that this conference will stimulate African research institutions to address this matter in their agenda and further enlighten the current knowledge and support health services in the development of supplementary control measures.

- Honorable Ministers;
- Distinguished participants;

I want to express my concern in relation to the funding gap of about US\$31 million, which is required for the implementation of the African regional preparedness and response plan. So far only US\$700,000 has been made available and it will be difficult to shift funds already earmarked for other public health programmes. I urge African governments to accelerate their efforts in mobilizing national and external resources to meet the requirements for the implementation of national preparedness and response plans. The estimated needs in terms of medicines, materials and vaccines may increase as the epidemic evolves. The capacity of populations for response to the Influenza Pandemic will depend on the access to health care, communication and social mobilization and effective implementation of regional and national “Pandemic Preparedness and Response Plans”.

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- Distinguished participants;

Disease outbreaks often elicit irrational fears and discriminatory behaviours among individuals, communities and countries. Therefore communication and social mobilization are of paramount importance. Regular communication of updated information to the public, health workers and other national stakeholders, should include what is known and not known about the pandemic, when and how to seek health care, and measures people can take to reduce their risk of infection. Doing so we will give the opportunity to people to realize the important role they can play to control and even stop the spread of the Pandemic virus at community level.

I have noted with satisfaction that Ministries of Health in many countries in the African region are already using effective means of communication, which has included community resource persons, the mass media, political, religious and opinion leaders, and other community structures such as schools and health facilities to raise awareness among the people. Remember that a successful epidemic response should engage a well-informed public as an active partner.

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As already mentioned, this is a matter of global concern and no country can do it all on its own. Therefore partnerships and international solidarity are essential components of the global, regional and country strategies to defeat this pandemic. In our view these principles should materialize in concrete actions such as sharing of influenza viruses, access to new technologies including vaccines and other related benefits.

Solidarity should also be extended to bridge the financial gaps of the national and international health development agenda.

At this point, allow me to express my appreciation to the National Institute for Communicable Diseases in South Africa, the WHO Collaborating Centres for Influenza at the Centres for Disease Control in Atlanta, the Public Health Laboratory in Mill Hill, London, and the Institut Pasteur in Paris for cooperating with member states in the African region to access their diagnostic facilities. It is through such collaboration that we shall be able to closely monitor the evolution of this disease globally.

Permit me at this juncture to re-affirm the commitment of World Health Organization under the leadership of its Director General, Dr Margaret Chan. WHO will continue to work with governments, partners, research institutions and pharmaceutical companies to find better solutions to tackle the pandemic and preserve lives of people.

As we meet to deliberate over the next three days, I have no doubt that we will be able to share our knowledge and experiences to mitigate the impact of *Influenza A H1N1 2009 Pandemic*.

Thank you for your attention.