

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

DELAY IN THE OPENING OF PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES

The Minister of Higher Education (Prof. Luo)

Mr Speaker, thank you for giving me this opportunity to render a ministerial statement regarding the delay in the opening of public universities, in particular the University of Zambia (UNZA) and the Copperbelt University (CBU).

Sir, in October, 2017, the first case of cholera was recorded in Lusaka. Towards the back end of the year, the epidemic had escalated to alarming proportions. In a bid to mitigate the effects of the epidemic, the Government, through the leadership of the hon. Minister of Health, decided to keep all schools, institutions of higher learning and other public entities such as markets, restaurants and pubs closed until such a time that the spread of the disease would be contained. These public higher learning institutions, namely; UNZA, CBU, Mulungushi, Kwame Nkrumah, Chalimbana, Mukuba and Kapasa Universities, which were scheduled to have opened in early January, 2018 were closed.

Mr Speaker, following the announcement by the hon. Minister of Health, the universities were routinely inspected by the public health teams from the Lusaka City Council (LCC) and the Ministry of Health on 2nd and 3rd January, 2018. The inspection was meant to assess the extent to which universities had complied with the standard public health requirements for learning institutions. Subsequent to these inspections, a report was produced with detailed areas that required attention.

Sir, in this regard, it was decided that UNZA and CBU would not reopen from recess on 5th January, 2018, until all the necessary rehabilitations were undertaken. In the same light, the reopening of Mulungushi, Chalimbana, Kwame Nkrumah, Mukuba and Kapasa Makasa Universities were also postponed after public health inspections.

Mr Speaker, on 12th January, 2018, an announcement was made at a joint press briefing that universities that met public health requirements would be inspected and allowed to open. UNZA and CBU remained closed because they did not meet the requirements for reopening. Among the universities that were cleared to reopen were Chalimbana and Kwame Nkrumah. Notwithstanding this clearance, these two universities experienced setbacks when they opened as they reverted to their old habits of not maintaining hygiene which presented a danger to the learners. Both Chalimbana and Kwame Nkrumah were again closed.

Mr Speaker, the continued closure of most of these institutions was in the interest of the general public. These institutions host huge cohorts in a concentrated area which would have placed the country at great risk had the institutions opened at the height of the cholera epidemic. These populations consist of people who come from all over the country so containing an epidemic that breaks out in a place like UNZA would be next to impossible unless the whole community was quarantined. Secondly, the hygiene standards in our public institutions have fallen to their lowest. This is why Chalimbana and Kwame Nkrumah, that had been opened, had to be closed after second inspection because they reverted to poor hygiene practices.

Sir, let me take advantage of this ministerial statement to announce that the inspections that have commenced through public health teams as a result of this epidemic will continue. This will ensure that high standards of hygiene are maintained in our highest institutions of learning. Therefore, our institutions will be inspected routinely, even after they open.

Mr Speaker, my ministry realises the important role that these institutions play in the economic dispensation of this country. It is this realisation that prompted my ministry to work closely with the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Local Government and the Disaster Management and Mitigation Unit (DMMU) in the Office of the Vice-President to ensure that existing sanitation conditions at these institutions were worked on, not only for the benefit of students and the public, but also to ensure the health of our students and staff in the future.

Sir, the Government has been striving to improve infrastructure at the three institutions by increasing students' accommodation and learning facilities. However, the bulk of the infrastructure has remained in a bad state due to lack of periodic maintenance by our university management. This has meant that sanitation facilities, among other infrastructure, have become deplorable and, in this instance, pose a threat to the health and wellbeing of the students and the general populace of this country.

Furthermore, Sir, our culture of dependence on especially the Government has created a situation in universities where taps, cisterns, sockets and other facilities are vandalised with impunity and there is no care to public property. The *boma iyanganepe* syndrome has taken centre stage in our institutions.

Mr Speaker, to ensure that the lives were safeguarded and the need to prevent cholera outbreaks in these institutions, my ministry worked with management teams of the institutions to ensure an improvement in sanitation and other conditions. This was not only aimed at protecting students and staff but also the great public of this country as the escalation of the cholera epidemic had become an epi-centre.

Mr Speaker, the focus of rehabilitation works at the three universities has been rehabilitation of the sewer systems, ablution blocks and bathing facilities such as showers, mending of water leakages and the general improvement of water supply through water reticulation. Subsequent to this rehabilitation, the Ministry of Health working with authorities have continued conducting inspections of the facilities to ensure that work is done to acceptable standards. Further inspections have been carried out since 26th January, 2018 and more continued on the 8th and 9th February, 2018. We expect the Copperbelt University to be inspected on 26th February, 2018. We hope this will be the last inspection before re-opening. I have also personally inspected both the Copperbelt University and the University of Zambia.

Mr Speaker, these inspections and my interactions with the university management revealed that despite the gallant efforts of the universities, the task of bringing the facilities to acceptable public health standards was a mammoth task that required a lot of financial and human resources.