

Corona mayhem

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As the fear of coronavirus infections spreads across the world, local authorities yesterday decided to close down all public and private schools until 14 April as ordinary Namibians scramble for face masks and hand sanitisers to help contain the further spread of the virus after a Romanian couple in Windhoek tested positive at the weekend.

The two cases are the country's first recorded coronavirus infections, prompting President Hage Geingob to announce a raft of emergency measures to control the further spread of the virus, which has now claimed over 6 000 lives globally.

Yesterday the education ministry announced the immediate closure of private and government schools for all learners and teachers due to the coronavirus outbreak. "The College of the Arts, libraries, resource centres, museums, National Art Gallery of Namibia and national literacy programmes are also closed and suspended with immediate effect," read a statement by acting education minister Martin Andjaba. Learners will not receive a first term progress report.

“Based on these amendments, crucial emphasis must be placed on the second term for teaching, learning and assessment to prepare learners for the second term examinations. This examination will cover the content of both the first and second term, therefore learners will not receive a first term progress report. The second term progress report shall be used for admission purposes.”

Meanwhile President Geingob, among others, cancelled the 21 March Independence Day celebrations, saying his swearing-in ceremony will take place at State House. “The financial outlay for the independence celebrations will be diverted to the fight against the coronavirus,” he said following an emergency meeting at State House with a number of Cabinet ministers.

The President also announced that all inbound and outbound flights to Qatar, Germany and Ethiopia are immediately suspended for 30 days. Government also suspended all travel of civil servants and staff of state-owned enterprises.

The Namibia University of Science and Technology moved its mid-term break that was initially scheduled for 6-10 April 2020 to this week. “Please note, as per the NUST Rules and Regulations, the semester break is only applicable to all students and all academic staff. This is therefore not applicable to administrative staff,” read the statement.

“However, the administrative staff may have the option of putting in leave for the mid-term break after consulting their directors and in line with the HR policies and procedures.”

The university also announced that graduation ceremonies scheduled for next month will now be held in October. “Students who are due to graduate in April will be able to pick up their certificates on campus or at a regional centre.”

Health minister Dr Kalumbi Shangula, who made the announcement of the Romanian couple testing positive for coronavirus, said the two nationals were immediately quarantined and contact tracing commenced. “This will be intensified to ensure that all contacts are traced in order to protect the Namibian public and prevent community transmission. This development demands extraordinary action by government. It calls for greater unity of purpose and actions by all of us as Namibians. The government shall introduce additional measures in the Covid-19 response. These measures will be announced as soon as they are finalised,” Shangula said.

The couple had travelled to Namibia from Spain via Doha, Qatar and arrived in Windhoek on Wednesday at Hosea Kutako International Airport. Shangula said the couple were screened like all other passengers, but did not show any signs to cause concern such as high fever.

Following measures announced by President Geingob, Air Namibia also announced the suspension of its Windhoek-Frankfurt route with immediate effect for 30 days. The airline announced all crew members on the SW286 would be required to take forced leave (self-quarantine) as a pre-cautionary measure. Air Namibia’s Airbus A330 aircraft will be

grounded for the next 30 days as a precaution to prevent the spread of Covid-19.

Elia Erastus, Air Namibia's acting CEO said the national airline activated its Crisis Management Centre (CMC) at the weekend to coordinate all developments, recommend best practices and implement mitigation actions relating to the prevention of Covid-19.

"We take the safety of all our passengers and nation at heart, hence the immediate alignment of the directive initiated by the Head of State. Air Namibia will continue to comply with all safety measures put in place at all our departing and arrival airports," he said.

Private sector

The Namibian Employers Federation (NEF) implored its members to minimise any retrenchments due to the coronavirus. NEF secretary general Daan Strauss said the federation understands the negative effect currently on certain business sectors as the result of fewer travellers coming to the country.

"This is putting pressure on business especially and initially tourist related. We urge all businesses to look at retrenchments as a very last resort to reduce costs," Strauss urged. NEF suggested that all staff be advised that bonuses, overtime and salary increases are frozen to contain costs. Equally, Strauss recommended there might also be other ways of reducing costs, such as cutting electricity and water consumption, reducing stockholding, streamlining delivery costs or consolidating with other business in the same field.

"As an extreme measure we refer to section 12 (6) of the Labour Act which allows employers to reduce working hours and salaries by no more than one half of the employee's basic wage for a period of three months, for operational reasons. This is obviously very drastic, but it might be better to have all staff earning something than some of them having nothing," he suggested.

However, he said, the best advice to avoid the spread of the coronavirus is prevention as per advice by public health institutions. NEF represents some 290 independent direct employers and through its associational members over 5 500 employers countrywide.

Students Union of Namibia (SUN) president Simon Amunime suggested that all institutions of higher learning and schools take precautions, including utilising online platforms to facilitate e-learning.

"Student education should not come at the cost of their health. Do it before it is too late. And we all know that our hospitals are not sufficiently prepared to take care of a large number of people who may need intensive care and ventilation and this could lead to higher mortality rates and a deeper crisis," Amunime said.

- Please note these are the emergency toll free numbers for reporting any suspicion of coronavirus – (0800 100 100) and (911).

