

SA government has spectacularly failed in its vaccine programme
By Siviwe Gwarube MP – DA Shadow Minister of Health

Chairperson,

It has undoubtedly been a difficult year for the globe, for South Africa, the Health Department and most devastatingly, the people of this country.

We have been languishing in the throes of this pandemic for exactly 14 months now.

While we were not able to prevent Covid-19 from arriving at the shores of the country, we were very much responsible for how we dealt this crisis.

Ultimately, it all comes down to how many lives we are able to save.

Simply put, we can only save lives and livelihoods by vaccinating as many people as possible.

But this has not been the case.

To the contrary.

The South African government has – thus far- failed in a spectacular fashion to begin vaccinating our citizens at pace.

Let me put this in context:

South Africa has vaccinated less than 1% of its population;

This is 1% out of the 40 million people meant to be targeted by year-end;

We have been surpassed by our peers on the continent such as Zimbabwe, Ghana, Rwanda and Nigeria.

Countries the world over have been vaccinating hundreds of thousands of their citizens daily, inoculating them against this virus while we are expected to be celebrating a measly 350 000 doses that will be delivered in a week.

To make matters worse, 3 days from now, we are expected to be rolling out phase 2 of the vaccination programme in the country.

This is while over 700 000 healthcare workers are yet to receive their jabs.

They will once again be expected to lay their lives on the front lines while continuously being let down by this government.

This poor and criminally slow vaccination programme has to be one of the biggest failures of the ANC government.

A capable government is one that will spring into action; negotiate for the securing of enough vaccines for the country and move with speed to roll it out to as many people as possible.

But ours is not a capable government.

Ours is government that took time to look to various sources for the supply of the vaccine;
Ours is a government that took time to set processes in place for the procurement of the vaccine;
And ours is a government that has – for the past 4 months – managed to cover its greatest assets against a pandemic – its healthcare workers.

And so 14 months later, we continue to languish as we now face the 3rd wave of Covid-19 infections.

It has recently been confirmed that the variant dominant in India has been detected in the country and experts have warned of a possibility for a new domestic variant that could emerge during this 3rd wave of infections.

This poses a threat to our health system and to the lives and livelihoods of the people of this country.

Let us make no mistake, this could have been avoided.

This is not a crisis that was beyond solid government interventions.

But ours is a government of inaction, obfuscation and that evades accountability.

Chairperson, we have repeatedly come to this House to reiterate the same thing; highlight the looming crisis and offer solutions.

Looking at the budget process of the upcoming financial year, it is clear that Covid-19 has come to exacerbate an existing mess.

The department has been plagued by grand corruption that saw thieves fleecing public money at the expense of basic Personal Protective Equipment, filling of vacancies and massive infrastructure backlogs which compromise the quality of care.

As the country sinks deeper into the economic crisis that this government has plunged us into, there is less money to do even the basics needed to deliver quality healthcare for our people.

That is why Dr Mkhize, it is now critical to ensure that the most crucial functions are prioritized in the next financial year:

1. Front line facing and clinic positions must be filled. Many of the facilities I have visited across the country have flagged this as a crisis. We cannot have a bloated administration while those who deliver a clinic service are stretched beyond their limits.
2. You must take an active role in ensuring that systems are in place across all provinces to rollout mass vaccination. Primary healthcare facilities remain the weakest link in the chain. This must be rectified if we are going to successfully rollout a vaccine.

3. Communication around the registration of people online and in facilities must be ramped up. Community media platforms, local leaders and community healthcare workers must form part of the strategy to reach as many people as possible. Registration uptake is poor. Not because people do not want a vaccine but because they do not know enough.
4. And finally, you must present to this House on the plans in place for dealing with the 3rd wave, while also trying to rollout a vaccine and contending with possible new variants.

The job ahead is difficult.

But it going to require tough decisions, stringent public spending and prioritizing the people of South Africa.

The plan to vaccinate 40 million people by the end of the year is seeming like a far-fetched fantasy at this rate.

Without the political will coupled with a well-running health system that is adequately funded – we will face more avoidable deaths for months to come.

Unless drastic measures are taken, those deaths will be squarely on this government.