WORLD TB DAY COMMEMORATION

SPEECH BY

HIS HONOUR THE VICE PRESIDENT

MR MOKGWEETSI MASISI

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FRANCISTOWN
Good morning,

1. It is indeed a pleasure to be with you this morning, as we join the global community in commemorating World Tuberculosis Day 2015. Today’s theme - “Reach the three million” - is a call for accelerated progress by the global community towards realizing an end to the TB scourge by 2035. This bold goal is further captured in the main message: “Reach, Treat, Cure Everyone”.

2. Ladies and Gentlemen, we are thus here today to play our part as Batswana in this global campaign by further mobilizing our domestic commitment, both politically and socially, by eliminating TB here in Botswana. This is a challenge for all of us.

3. Tuberculosis has been and remains one of the biggest killers amongst the infectious diseases afflicting humankind. Globally, TB is still responsible for the deaths of about 1.5 million people annually, including women of reproductive age and children.

4. Some nine million people around the world are further infected with TB every year. Unfortunately, about a third of these or some three million fail to access necessary health services in terms of early diagnosis, treatment and/or care. Most of this population live in the world’s poorest and most vulnerable communities, particularly in the developing world.
5. Director of Ceremonies, as we lay the local groundwork for eliminating TB in our own country, we should take stock of what has been accomplished and still needs to be done toward achieving good health in the context of the United Nations (UN) Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and our own national Vision 2016.

6. Securing good health for all by improving the quality of life for Batswana, as well as the quality and reach of our health services, is a key component of our journey towards a more compassionate, just and caring nation. That is why TB treatment in our country is accessible to all. We have further committed ourselves to controlling the spread of other associated infectious diseases throughout the country, including HIV/AIDS, while alleviating the suffering of the afflicted.

7. Ladies and Gentlemen, I am happy to report that in each of these areas we have made commendable progress. In 2000 Botswana numbered among 147 UN member states that made a commitment to achieving a set of 8 mutually reinforcing development goals by 2015. Among the health related issues, was Goal 6: “Combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases including TB”. The associated target was to: “Have halted by 2015 and begun to reverse the incidence, prevalence and death rates associated with tuberculosis”.

8. In this respect, Botswana is one of the few countries in the region that have achieved the 2015 TB target, with our incidence, prevalence and TB related mortality all declining. We cannot, however, afford to let such progress lull us into complacency. TB remains a major public health challenge in Botswana, with an estimated 10,000 people falling sick annually.

9. The drug-resistant TB continues to be an especially serious threat, complicating treatment and care. Research has shown this to be the result of a combination of factors related to the management of the disease, length of, and compliance to, treatment.
10. Director of Ceremonies, in recent years the TB epidemic in Botswana has in fact been largely fuelled by the spread of HIV. People living with HIV are more likely to become sick with TB compared to those who are HIV negative. Currently about two-thirds of our TB patients are also HIV infected [MoH/Botswana National TB Program Annual Reports 2010-11, 2012 and 2013 preliminary results]. This is why we have a deliberate TB/HIV policy framework which guides the integration of TB/HIV treatment. The message here being, the best way to not get infected is to remain HIV negative.

11. It is, in this context, worth noting that Government’s commitment to providing antiretroviral treatment has gone a long way in averting many opportunistic infections including TB.

12. Another emerging challenge is the existence multi-drug resistant tuberculosis. Currently, we are confronted annually with an estimated 100 such cases. Talks are ongoing to increase CD4 count from 350 to 500, this is a good thing to do.

13. Ladies and Gentlemen, with the support of our partners we have been able to roll-out a new diagnostic tool, namely the Gene Xpert machine, across the country. This has made it possible to identify TB cases more quickly in order to initiate early treatment.

14. In the end, however, realising our goal of fully eliminating TB necessitates more community and civil society involvement. This fact is reflected as cornerstone of our national tuberculosis control strategy. The Community TB Care initiative has made it possible for meaningful contributions in the control of TB in various ways such as patient support at household level.

15. Ladies and Gentlemen, I reiterate, keeping TB at bay is everyone’s responsibility, including the corporate sector. Every TB patient should be able to access treatment without fear of stigma or unwarranted retrenchment. The employer must also allow for time off for any TB patient to access necessary care.
16. His Excellency the President has entrusted me with steering employment creation. It is in this context that I am mindful that the socio-economic consequences of the TB burden stretch beyond the health sector. Being mindful of such, it becomes imperative to nurture the conditions necessary to create employment free of TB! I therefore further implore the business community to invest more in their human resource by instilling trust and empathy among your employees. There is no doubt that investing in a healthy workforce makes good business sense.

17. To the international community, we value your continued support: technical and financial. Let me assure all of you, Government is relentless in securing the necessary international and domestic resources to combat TB. Research remains central to our response to the epidemic. We shall therefore continue to seek out research partners.

18. Finally may I challenge you all, to reflect on your personal aspirations in this shared quest to make Botswana TB free. May I also proclaim my timeless availability to the Minister and her partners in this fight against TB. Therefore no one can be left behind in this struggle. As we commemorate World TB Day 2015, we rededicate ourselves as a nation to the global effort overcoming the TB challenge. Let us therefore be bold and resolute as we come together to ensure the health, wellbeing and dignity of all Batswana.

19. Thank you for your kind attention. PULA!