

Dealing with the menacing COVID 19: The Zambian Approach!

Introduction

The first cases of COVID-19 were recorded in the Republic of Zambia on March 18, 2020. This involved a Zambian couple who had returned from holiday in France. One week later on 25th March 2020, 10 more cases were detected among a group of Zambians of Pakistani origin who had returned from a religious meeting in Pakistan. Following this sudden increase in the number of cases, the government began to disseminate key messages regarding the prevention measures that citizens should adopt to fight the virus. Citizens were told to wash hands often with soap and use sanitizers; maintain social distance and wear masks in public places. People were also encouraged to stay home.

Government's restriction measures

Beyond the key messages, the Government announced extra measures to contain the spread of the virus and protect the citizens as follows:

- i. Closed all schools, colleges and universities;
- ii. Alerted all Zambian missions abroad to review the issuance of visas to people wanting to travel to Zambia.
- iii. The Department of Immigration was requested to arrange for the screening at all port of entry into the country of travelers from countries affected by COVID-19; upon screening those who exhibited symptoms would be quarantined in a medical facility for treatment, while other travellers without symptoms would also be quarantined for at least 14 days at their own cost.
- iv. Government suspended non-essential foreign travel by officials, particularly to countries which had confirmed cases of COVID-19.
- v. Public gatherings such as conferences, weddings, funerals, festivals were to be restricted to a minimum of 50 people subject to them complying with public health authority guidelines.
- vi. Restaurants were to operate only on a take-away and delivery basis.
- vii. All bars, night clubs, cinemas, gyms and casinos were ordered to close.
- viii. All international flights to and from Livingstone's Harry Mwanga Nkumbula, Ndola's Simon Mwansa Kapwepwe and Mfuwe international airports were suspended. Instead, all international flights had to arrive and depart from Lusaka's Kenneth Kaunda International Airport only. This was to ensure efficient and effective screening of travellers and the necessary follow up by health authorities;

While people were encouraged to stay at home, the country has not been in a complete lockdown yet. Key business activities and consumer chain stores have continued to operate despite the scaled down level of activities. Unlike other countries, no curfew was declared in Zambia.

Government's measures to protect the poor

Recognising that the measures put in place would negatively affect people's livelihoods, the Zambian government came up with supplementary measures aimed at lessening their impact. These included:

- i. Setting up an Epidemic Preparedness Fund under the Ministry of Health amounting to ZK57 million (approx. USD 3.2 million)
- ii. Cabinet approving a COVID-19 Contingency and Response Plan with a budget of ZK659 million (approx. USD 36.6 million) under the Disaster Management and Mitigation Unit;
- iii. Releasing ZK500 million (USD 27.8 million) to reduce outstanding arrears to 1,500 pensioners under Public Service Pension Fund and retirees under Ministry of Justice;
- iv. Releasing ZK170 million (approx. USD 9.5 million) to banks to reduce outstanding third-party arrears and other employee related commitments.

How COVID- 19 has impacted the Zambian economy

As the pandemic has unleashed untold social and economic havoc worldwide, Zambia has not been spared the onslaught. The COVID -19 has equally depressed economic activity in Zambia, adversely affecting levels of production, distribution and consumption in the national economy.

In response to this negative impact, the government of Zambia has instituted key measures to mitigate the impact. These include:

- i. Government releasing ZK2.5 billion (approx. USD 140 million) to reduce domestic arrears owed to domestic suppliers of goods and services;
- ii. Government releasing ZK140 million (approx. USD 7.8 million) to pay local contractors in the road sector.
- iii. In order to provide tax relief to businesses, the Government suspended custom duty on imported ethanol for use in alcohol-based sanitisers and other medicine-related products subject to guidelines issued by Zambia Revenue Authority.
- iv. Government also relaxed payment of VAT on imported spare parts, lubricants, and stationery to ease pressure on companies;
- v. Government also suspended import duties on the importation of concentrates in the mining sector to ease pressure on the sector; and
- vi. Government suspended export duty on precious metals and crocodile skin.
- vii. The government also announced through the Bank of Zambia a number of measures to encourage the use of digital financial services. These measures were aimed at preventing the spread of the disease by reducing cash transactions, decongesting banks and minimising person to person contact in the conduct of financial transactions. The measures are:
 - Waived charges for person to person electronic money transfers of up to ZK150. These transactions are now free of charge.
 - Revised upwards transactions and balance limits for individuals, small scale farmer and enterprises. The limits by agents have been revised

upwards to give agents more float to deal with transactions. This was made to decongest banks.

- Removed the transaction and balance limits on agents and corporate wallets; and
- Reduced the processing fees for Real Time Gross Settlement System.

viii. The government has also made available a business stimulus fund of ZK10 billion (approx. USD 555.5 million) aimed at supporting small and medium enterprises (SMEs) affected by COVID-19.

The role of the trade unions in fighting the COVID 19

The role of trade unions has mainly been limited to advocating for the protection and respect of workers' rights, including the right to paid leave and job security during COVID-19. The unions in the mining industry, for instance, have been advocating and actively lobbying government for non-closure of one of Zambia's copper mines (Mopani Copper Mines) due to the impact of COVID-19. The unions in the health sector have also voiced out concerns about occupational health and safety for frontline healthcare workers.

Like their counterparts elsewhere, unions in Zambia have to continue to show interest in the impact of the pandemic on workers and in the protection of workers' rights and interests during this period. Importantly, Zambian unions also have to prepare for ensuring that workers interests are fully taken into account in the process of national recovery that is bound to follow the economic and social devastation wrought by COVID-19.

Conclusion

As of May 13, 2020 Zambia had a cumulative total of 446 cases with total recoveries of 124 and 7 deaths.

There is no doubt that the Zambian government is doing all it can to tame the further spread of COVID-19 by educating the public about the virus, instituting preventive measures and at the same time working to ensure that the instituted measures do not gravely affect the ability of citizens to earn their livelihoods. The mitigating social protection measures aimed at cushioning the citizens, coupled with the economic policies meant to prevent further damage to the economy, are all to be commended.

Trade unions have to remain vigilant and to monitor to ensure that the announced measures are implemented. But above all, unions must continue to act as a bulwark of workers' rights and those of the vulnerable sections of the population. In doing so the Zambian trade unions also have to develop their ability as a credible social partner that can be relied upon to champion the interests of the workers and that of the country as a whole in the coming period.