



Republic of Namibia

Opening Address

By

**Dr Richard Nchabi Kamwi, MP
Minister of Health and Social Services**

At the

**10th Meeting of the Africa Regional Certification Commission on
Polio Eradication**

**21st October 2008
Safari Court Hotel and Conference Centre
Windhoek, Namibia**

Programme Director - Mr Kahuure, Permanent Secretary of MoHSS

The WHO Country Representative - Dr Magda Robalo

Chairperson and Members of the Africa Regional Certification Commission

Representatives from Headquarter and Regional Offices of WHO

UNICEF Country Representative - Mr Ian McLeod

Distinguished Chairs and members from the National Certification & Polio Expert Committees

Members of the Inter Agency Coordinating Committee

Representatives of the Medical Association/Medical Board

Representatives of UN Agencies and Development Partners

Colleagues from other Ministries and the Ministry of Health and Social Services

Invited guests from different Pharmaceutical companies

Members of the Media

Distinguished Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you all at this historic event, the 10th Annual General Meeting of the Africa Regional Certification Commission (ARCC) on Polio Eradication. I would like to thank the World Health Organization Regional Office for Africa for choosing Namibia to host this very important meeting. Gatherings such as this one, place a spotlight on our joint work on the African continent towards polio eradication in particular and child health in general. Such meetings also accord good opportunities for updating and exchanging country experiences on polio eradication in Africa.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Allow me to especially welcome the esteemed Chairperson and members of the Africa Regional Certification Commission on Polio Eradication to Namibia. As an independent panel of very eminent and highly respected international public health experts, history will remember you for the unreserved commitment and unparalleled dedication you are demonstrating in carrying out your work. Indeed, your objectivity, competency, professionalism and impartiality are the

major requirements for countries in Africa and the rest of the world to look at our certification process as a credible one. I take this opportunity to congratulate you for the just course promoting good health for mankind.

It was on this month, 30 years ago, that health leaders of the world gathered in Alma Ata to agree on the historic Alma Ata Declaration on Primary Health Care. Enshrined in this Declaration as one of the eight basic elements of primary health care, is the key issue of equitable access to vaccination to help prevent, eliminate or eradicate childhood killer diseases. Alma Ata underlined the equity principle that all people, without distinction of race, religion, political belief, economic or social condition have a right to equal access to the needed vaccines and interventions. Immunization is critical for the strengthening of health systems and is a major element of the efforts towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals.

Twenty years ago, in 1988, Health Ministers of the world passed the resolution for polio eradication at the World Health Assembly in Geneva, Switzerland. Our Governments have given top priority to

ensuring that our children do not die unnecessarily from vaccine preventable diseases and made significant progress in the implementation of the World Health Assembly resolution on Polio Eradication. We shall hear the evidence of the efforts in this important meeting.

During the next few days, the Africa Regional Certification Commission will take a decision on the performance towards polio eradication of the six selected African countries represented here namely, Burkina Faso, Eritrea, Liberia, Madagascar, Mali and Namibia. Chairpersons of each of the National Certification Committees (NCC) will present their polio documentation reports to the Commission and based on its deliberations and assessment, polio free status may be declared for the presenting countries.

Director of Ceremony,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As you probably know, for any country to meet the global Polio Free Certification Standard, a number of important and stringent

criteria must be met with. Achieving these criteria and putting oneself up for ARCC assessment for certification is no mean feat. I hereby would like to take this opportunity to congratulate all the countries present here today. You would not have been invited to this meeting of the Commission, if you had not already met these criteria.

It is also a requirement that countries must have established first, a National Polio Expert Committee (NPEC), secondly, a National Certification Committee (NCC) and thirdly, a National Task Force for laboratory containment of Wild Polio Virus (NTF). To all the members of these committees I want to say that your commitment and dedication towards your country achieving and maintaining Polio Free Status is highly appreciated and acknowledged with thanks. Allow me, at this juncture, to take this opportunity to thank my entire team for the hard work during the past months and years, to put together our certification documentation to be presented to the ARCC and to our partners who tirelessly supported the process, particularly the WHO country office.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Our main challenge today, around the world, is to ensure that Wild Polio Virus transmission is interrupted in the four remaining countries where the virus is still endemic. These countries are the following: Afghanistan, India, Nigeria and Pakistan. Clearly, global interdependence increases the vulnerability of people everywhere to the uncontrolled spread of diseases through epidemics of national or trans-national proportions, even countries that are currently certified polio-free will need to remain vigilant. We may not rest or become complacent. Improving routine immunization coverage at national and sub-national levels must remain a high priority in our respective countries.

We must focus on innovative and effective strategies to ensure that all susceptible children are reached and vaccinated. We must ensure that our communities accept and fully participate in all the efforts applied by Government and our partners. We need to strengthen our surveillance systems to the extent that we will be able to timely detect imported cases and effectively respond and contain it.

I am pleased to report that Namibia has a track record of responding effectively and timely to polio importation within less than 20 days. I wish to encourage that we maintain such record.

Director of Ceremony,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Immunization is one of the most successful and cost-effective health interventions ever. Through immunization, the world was able to eradicate smallpox; so far, the global incidence of polio has decreased by 99%; as of the end of 2006, the WHO African Region has attained a 91% reduction in measles deaths as a direct result of the interventions, surpassing the goal of 90% reduction set for the end of 2009.

According to WHO estimates, 2 million deaths were averted in 2003 alone; however, an estimated 27 million infants and 40 million pregnant women were not immunized in that same year. Furthermore, 2,5 million children under the age of five years still dies

every year from vaccine preventable diseases. Ladies and gentlemen, invited guests, we have the means to change this situation. Let us do it and sustain our achievements!

More efficacious vaccines are becoming available globally, which we need to integrate into our national expanded programmes on immunization so that we can keep on making progress in our quest to reduce infant and child mortality. I am proud to inform you that Namibia is moving forward to introduce a pentavalent vaccine into our national schedule as of next year.

The Ministry of Health and Social Services in Namibia in collaboration with our partners in health such as WHO, UNICEF, other development partners and many stakeholders and friends from the civil society and private sector, strive for a Namibia in which children enjoy the highest possible level of health. We need to achieve our Vision 2030 and build a Namibia that fulfills the needs, rights and aspirations of our children and that enables them to live and thrive so that they may achieve their fullest potential.

Director of Ceremonies,

We in the African region can eradicate polio; if other regions in the world have done it, we too should be able to do so. Achieving, maintaining and sustaining certification-level surveillance and containment are possible. They require the continued commitments from national governments and all partners and stakeholders. These continued efforts will be necessary to ensure the global interruption of polio transmission and guard against any reemergence of poliovirus until such a day that the World Health Organization declares that the poliovirus has been fully eradicated from the world!

Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

During this week the Commission will have detailed discussion with every country team here present. Countries will update the Commission on various aspects concerning their efforts to date and receive feedback on their progress. On behalf of the Namibian

Government, I want to encourage the Commission to be frank and to the point. Let us know where we have done well. But, also do not hesitate to clearly point out where we must further improve our national efforts. Namibia, for one, will take your comments and suggestions as constructive and valuable inputs to enable us reach our goal of being a polio-free country.

I am convinced that your deliberations will be of great value in our collective effort to eradicate childhood diseases on the African continent.

Director of Ceremonies,

Distinguished Guests, Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,

In conclusion, on behalf of the Ministry of Health and Social Services and all our esteemed immunization partners, and on behalf of the Government of the Republic of Namibia, I would like to assure you of my country's continued commitment to the fight against vaccine preventable diseases in general and polio eradication in

particular and to improving the health of our most vulnerable and yet “the hope for our future” our children.

I now have the distinct honor and privilege to declare this 10th Meeting of the Africa Regional Certification Commission for the Eradication of Polio officially open and wish you successful deliberations.

I thank you for your kind attention.

Merci Buk