

REPUBLIC OF NAMIBIA



THE PRESIDENCY

MEDIA RELEASE

(FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE)

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Windhoek

All Media

Statement Attributable to the Press Secretary, Dr. Alfredo Tjiurimo Hengari

Compliance with COVID-19 Regulations While Championing Press Freedom

President Hage G. Geingob demonstrated once again his commitment to freedom of the press by asking about the absence of journalists from the 16th COVID-19 Public Briefing on 28 August 2020. I take full responsibility for the fact that we had to comply with the regulations and the health experts' advisories regarding limitations regarding gatherings. **We could not invite the media to be present, taking the risk of placing the health of anyone in jeopardy.** The Namibian would be the first to hurl attacks at the Presidency for ignoring regulations and advise from experts in the health sector. Notwithstanding exceptions with regard to public gatherings, **we could not accommodate hordes of journalists for the 16th Presidential COVID-19 Update when the regulations advice 10 people per gathering.**

The media invitation by the Press Secretary on 27 August 2020 was explicit that **journalists would have to follow the Public Briefing on the public broadcaster, NBC and the social media channels of the Presidency,** which also connected several media houses. Unquestionably, there was consensus about that fact, imposed by the regulations and our collective desire to contain the spread of COVID-19 at a crucial time in our fight against the virus.

I should emphasize that the **President led 16 COVID-19 updates up to now - and during 14 of those, journalists were present, asked questions, extending the briefings by 3 hours on average.** What our colleagues in the press will not tell you is that President Geingob leads questions and answer sessions with the press that are way beyond the norm. Similarly, journalists in this country have wide access to Presidential meetings in ways that are unprecedented.

In April 2020, during a briefing with regulations placing restrictions on the number of people in a meeting, questions were send via

WhatsApp and read out to the President and the Executive team. This was a cumbersome process for a live Broadcast and we could not attempt that method again for 28 August 2020. **Is transparency compromised because a journalist did not ask a question at a Briefing followed by hundreds of thousands of Namibians? Namibians who exercise and enjoy their rights in our vibrant democracy don't believe that to be the case.**

On Friday 28 August 2020, we opted for a format where the President and the Executive provided an update without a Q&A, which is an exception to the rule. Just for the benefit of many, Presidents and Prime Ministers of leading democracies address their nations at press conferences on COVID-19, and then leave without taking a single question. To contain the virus and to protect lives, there are Presidencies that have been locked out to media since the outbreak of COVID-19. However, **President Geingob has remained open, with journalists flocking to State House for the COVID-19 Public Briefings.**

President Geingob is transparent with the Namibian public and demonstrated on 28 August 2020 once again that the press is a key stakeholder in the dissemination of information. But **with COVID-19 and stage 3 regulations, including the surge in COVID-19 cases in Windhoek, we could not take the risk of 100 people converging in the Briefing room.** It is why we advised the media to follow-up with questions directly to line ministers, including the Presidency. **There was no objection to the advisory.**

ICT infrastructure requires massive financial outlays. For the Friday 28 August 2020 Briefing, the Presidency pursued the option of journalists joining the 16th Presidential Public Briefing on COVID-19 via zoom or another virtual platform. However, IT personnel informed the Press Secretary that it would not be feasible, and would require capabilities that we don't have. It is why we shared the media advisory to communicate that they follow the Update via our public broadcaster and the social media pages of the Presidency. This worked extremely well and The Namibian benefitted from these platforms as well.

It is equally important to emphasize that **the COVID-19 Public Briefings are platforms for the elected President and Government to inform Namibians about measures to contain the virus.** They are not the exclusive territory of the media. **The commitment to transparency of the elected President is not undermined because a handful of journalists didn't ask questions during a Public Briefing whose objective is to communicate to Namibians measures being taken to protect their health and their livelihoods.** It is fiction and illogical for anyone to try to imply that the absence of journalists at a Presidential COVID-19 Public Briefing that seeks to comply with health advisories is an affront to transparency or press freedom. **During our fight against COVID-19, the elected President, the embodiment of the sovereignty of the Namibian people has a primary responsibility towards Namibians, to protect their lives and to safeguard their livelihoods.**

Namibia remains a country whose commitment to rights is widely acknowledged. It is not going to change for as long as President Geingob is the Head of State.

MEDIA ENQUIRIES

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