

COVID-19 testing capacity must be improved

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□ THE uncertainties brought about by COVID-19 have put our young democracy on a path to a concerning future but be that as it may, we must be certain that in order to be better positioned to respond to the full threat of COVID-19, our testing capacity needs drastic and urgent improvement.

There is no denying that our testing has been not sufficient and Namibia needs thousands of tests to better understand the true number of infections and halt their spread.

While the number of confirmed cases in Namibia is rising gradually with a the total number of confirmed cases now standing at sixteen (16), this week, President Hage Geingob in a statement, acknowledged testing capability needs improvement adding that all efforts are being made to procure sufficient testing kits and medical equipment to strengthen our capacity to respond.

In the interim Geingob urged all Namibians to obey and cooperate with the authorities highlighting that this deadly virus does not respect social strata, race, ethnicity or boundaries.

Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the World Health Organisation director-general, last week was quoted saying: "We have a simple message for all countries: test, test, test." The message is even more relevant for countries with fragile health systems such as Namibia to stop the coronavirus from spreading to the majority of the country where controlling the pandemic might prove to be a tougher task. Health experts have emphasised that testing more people allows for early identification, isolation and treatment of coronavirus patients.

Perhaps, this is the best time to take cue from our neighbours, South Africa that have rolled out a mass testing campaign that has reached nearly 60 000 people with plans to ramp up the exercise.

Such tests would help the country prevent a major catastrophe in Namibia considering the fact that if the virus was to reach our informal settlements such as Havana, it would mean rampant spread that might prove difficult to contain.

We must not be oblivious to the fact that the pandemic continues to escalate tremendously and the number of deaths is increasing rapidly. Consequently, the world is witnessing an unprecedented number of new infections and thousands of lives lost in a very short space of time.

While efforts by our health ministry are commendable, more needs to be done in view of testing. We have seen many cases where people that are infected show no symptoms. We have a general understanding that symptoms could show after a period spanning 14 days. These realities must compel us to take a precautionary stance to start mass testing as soon as possible. This exercise that we highly recommend can make a difference in our bid to defeat COVID-19 that seems to be attempting to settle on our shores.

South Africa's Health Minister Zweli Mkhize last week made a point that is worth pondering. He said, "Next month the flu season will start, thus making more people sick with similar symptoms ... these will flood our hospitals and clinics and create a fertile ground for coronavirus to spread," he said. "We might be currently experiencing calm before we have a devastating storm."

This may sound alarmist, but is worrying nonetheless. It is better for us to deploy full understand of what we dealing with before we get there and the only way to do so is to deploy a mass testing programme.