

**Keynote Address by the Hon Minister of Health, Dr Joe Phaahla, MP, at the
Opening of the Regional Diagnostic Demonstration Centre**

9th December 2022

Your Excellency US Ambassador to South Africa, Dr. Ruben Brigety II,

Dr. Talkmore Maruta, representing Dr. Ahmed Ogwel Ouma the Acting-Director General of the Africa CDC

Dr. Robert Pope DTRA-CTR Program Director

The current Chair (Lesotho) of the Southern Africa Regional Biosafety and Biosecurity Technical Working Group

Representatives of the US Mission to RSA,

Officials of South African governmental departments

The Chairman of the NHLS Board,

The CEO of the NHLS

Distinguished Guests

Good morning and a warm welcome to you all. Over the past decade, Africa has experienced an increased number of devastating outbreaks, including Ebola in West Africa and now the COVID-19 pandemic. Upholding robust biosafety and biosecurity systems and practices remains a critical priority for the global community, especially in mounting a response to these outbreaks. The COVID-19 pandemic compounded the public health challenges experienced on the African continent where resources to respond to emerging and re-emerging

epidemic-prone diseases remain limited. The pandemic amplified pre-existing concerns in Africa and elsewhere about the safekeeping and handling of pathogens, samples, and other potentially harmful biological materials, and prompted construction of new laboratories with new technologies, but not all were accompanied with rigorous personnel training, robust dual-use oversight protocols, bioinformatics, cybersecurity, and physical plant security.

To strengthen the efficiency of responding quickly, member states in the Africa Region need to improve their capacities in disease recognition and laboratory competence, including biosafety and biosecurity capacities. The collaboration between the Governments of South Africa and the United States of America to establish this Regional Diagnostic Demonstration Centre (RDDC), as a regional resource for the provision of specialised diagnostic training and capacity building for Africa in the areas of viral haemorrhagic fevers and other emerging infectious diseases, was a timely development indeed.

The South African government has supported initiatives aligned with its' commitment to playing a central role in laboratory capacity building in Africa. Since the launch, in 2019, of the Africa Centre's for Disease Control and Prevention's (Africa CDC) Biosecurity and Biosafety Initiative as a mechanism to strengthen the biosecurity and biosafety systems of African Union Member States to enable them to comply with international standards for safety and security, South African experts have played a significant role in supporting the objectives of this Initiative.

This and other initiatives like it, illustrate how regional collaborative action can be harnessed to implement robust structures and programs aimed at improving health security and capabilities. It is not surprising therefore your Excellency Dr. Brigety, that the vision expressed through the efforts of your government led by the Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA) in collaboration with their counterparts here at the NICD/NHLS, has produced a facility with great promise.

As you know, South Africa developed and deployed Mobile Laboratory Unit (MLU) capacity through the WHO-GOARN recruitment mechanism, in Sierra Leone, Freetown on 17 August 2014 as part of WHO EVD outbreak response in West Africa. This mission was led by Prof. Janusz Paweska who has been a great proponent of developing our outbreak response capability and who began deliberations with DTRA on the idea of building a mock training laboratory.

The reason why I said that this facility has great promise is because the Africa CDC has since certified the RDDC as the first Regional Centre of Excellence for Biosafety and Biosecurity (RCoEBB) to offer its Regional Training and Certification Programs for Biosafety and Biosecurity Professionals in the Africa Region. This facility will serve as a pilot for the other four (4) regional centres of excellence that the Africa CDC plans to establish across Africa thus there is no room for failure. It is imperative that make a deliberate and concerted effort aimed at building regional capability to overcome identified regional biosafety and biosecurity vulnerabilities.

At a meeting in early November of this year, hosted by the Global Partnerships Signature Initiative to mitigate biological threats in Africa, I expressed South Africa's continued commitment to building regional laboratory capacity so that in the event of an outbreak in the region we can mitigate the risk of spread within the region and beyond. The role of governments in improving biosecurity and global capacities to prevent, detect, and respond to infectious events (whether deliberate, accidental or natural) cannot be over-emphasized.

I am pleased to also mention that at the same meeting, the Canadian High Commissioner to RSA, His Excellency Mr. Christopher Cooler, announced a funding commitment to the establishment of the RDDC as a regional centre of excellence. This outpouring of expressions of commitment from you our partners further demonstrates the critical role that RSA has to play in capacity building efforts in the region, and this centre will be crucial to that effort.

This facility and its mission are well in line with my departments efforts to strengthen international development through partnerships and collaborations aimed at sharing best practices and lessons on public health and global health governance. Advancing the gains achieved to-date through our collaborative efforts should inspire us to come up with more projects of this nature aimed at improving Africa's regional biosafety and biosecurity capabilities.

I would like to acknowledge and express my appreciation for the long standing collaboration to strengthen national capacities to prevent, detect and respond to biological threats, with government of the government of the United States

of America, its different agencies and various implementing partners. I wish the NHLS and its division, the NICD, well as they operationalise the RDDC to make the envisioned meaningful impact on improving Africa's regional biosafety and biosecurity capabilities a reality.

I thank you