

SPEECH BY MINISTER OF HEALTH, DR JOE PHAAHLA, SOUTH AFRICA, AT THE OPENING OF THE 13TH BRICS HEALTH MINISTERS MEETING

DURBAN INTERNATIONAL CONVENTION CENTRE

04 AUGUST 2023

Your Excellencies,

Minister of Health of the Republic of Brazil; Hon. Nisia Veronica Trindade Lima,

Minister of Health of the Russian Federation; Hon Dr Mikhail Murashko,

Minister of Health & Family Welfare of the Republic of India; Hon Dr Mansukh Mandaviya,

Vice Minister of the National Health Commission of the People's Republic of China; Hon Lei Haichao,

Deputy Minister of Health, Republic of South Africa; Hon Dr Sibongiseni Dhlomo,

WHO Country Representative: South Africa; Dr Owen Kaluwa,

Diplomatic Representatives of BRICS countries in South Africa,

Senior Government Officials,

Ladies and Gentlemen

I wish to welcome you to the 13th BRICS Health Ministers meeting in South Africa, under the theme: **“Bridging the Gap on Sustainable Health on the road to Universal Health Coverage 2023”**, at a time when Covid-19 is no longer a global health emergency, as was announced by the World Health

Organization in May 2023. We have indeed come a long way, and for more than a year the pandemic has been on a downward trend, allowing most countries to return to life as we knew it before Covid-19. Now, Covid-19 cases and deaths are about the lowest they've been in three years.

While we are no longer in the crisis mode, we cannot afford to let our guard down. This virus will still unfortunately continue to cause havoc in our population and in our economy. What we are hopeful for is that we have the tools and the political will in place to ensure that the future waves do not result in more severe disease, waves of death and we can achieve the goal with the tools we have at hand. We just need to make sure that we are tracking the virus because it will continue to evolve and pose risk in our societies.

Our partnership has a significant role to play in surveillance, preparedness and in developing health mechanisms to confront known and unknown pandemics. We take over the leadership helm from a well led 12th Meeting of BRICS Ministerial of Health, which was led by the Government of China, especially under the trying times that we faced due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which had devastating ripple effects to our social and economic lives, posing huge challenges to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Over the last decade, the BRICS countries have committed to substantial health-system reforms that have been designed to improve equity in service use, quality and financial protection, with the ultimate goal of achieving

universal health coverage. These health reforms represent an important attempt to translate BRICS countries wealth into better health.

Ministers, Ladies and Gentlemen

I would like to share with you that South Africa has reached a significant milestone in this area. On the 13th of June, the National Assembly passed the National Health Insurance (NHI) Bill paving the way for universal healthcare, bringing it a step closer to being signed into law and being rolled out. This is one of the most revolutionary bills ever passed by the National Assembly since the dawn of our democracy in 1994. The bill will now go to the National Council of Provinces for concurrence before it goes to the president for his consideration.

UHC is undoubtedly, the cornerstone to achieving SDG3, on good health and well-being. As we move towards the UN High-Level Meeting on Universal Health Coverage (UHC) 2023, providing countries and all stakeholders with an opportunity to reinvigorate progress towards delivering health for all, on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly (UNGA) at its 78th session, we have an opportunity to make our voices heard as BRICS countries building on our hard negotiated and agreed goals towards universal health agenda.

It is undeniable that multilateralism will now be the order of the day and that the BRICS partnership will add its weight to advocate for some of the more difficult decisions that need to be made to advance the global health agenda. Together we are a force to be reckoned with, as we carry collectively, a great number of the world population of under privileged societies. so we should

leverage our involvement in the G20 to push the global health agenda and related areas for ensuring global health security.

There is undoubtedly still a lot of work to be done to ensure access and equity to safe, efficacious, accessible, and affordable diagnostics, medicines, vaccines and essential medical products to people from different countries especially developing countries, and equitable distribution of vaccines and expeditious vaccination, to fill the immunization gap globally. We have individually and collectively made progress on vaccine manufacturing in our country. We should, therefore, remain focused on discussions on the importance of the WTO on relevant IP waiver proposals, as well as capacity building and strengthening local production of vaccines and other health tools, especially in developing countries. We should also continue to support the work of the mNRA hubs.

Let us be reminded that, at our 12th meeting last year, we had intensive discussions on several topics, including COVID-19 prevention and control, health system strengthening and digital health, TB Prevention and Control, public health emergency alert, pandemic prevention preparedness and response and best practices in medical treatment. It is therefore imperative that we get down to an action implementation mode to ensure that the goals and objectives expoused in all these initiatives are realized for the betterment of the lives of our people.

We also agreed that BRICS countries should jointly take proactive and effective measures to prevent and reduce the risk of cross-border transmission of infectious diseases and contribute to improving global health.

Our technical experts have been hard at work in this area and have developed clear implementation modalities for the envisaged information exchange platform for the BRICS Intergrated Early Warning System for preventing mass infectious diseases risks.

This year, we have added an important workstream on the establishment of a BRICS Network of Public Health Emergency Centres (PHEOC), serving as nerve centres for preparation and response to public health emergencies. This is especially critical as we reflect on the COVID-19 pandemic response and aim to build back better for future outbreaks and pandemics. The effective coordination and improved control of outbreaks as evidenced by shorter times from detection to response that a functional PHEOC is valuable in the prompt containment of infectious disease outbreaks in all countries. We have a lot to learn from each other in this area and a lot of work to work collectively as BRICS formation.

Let me also remind the meeting that, at the 14th BRICS Summit hosted by China last year, our Heads of State, emphasized their support for the work of the health stream, particularly in the area of vaccine development, manufacturing and research, BRICS TB Research Network initiative, which will contribute to achieving the WHO goal of ending TB by 2030, as well as collaboration within our medicines regulatory authorities. The work of the BRICS TB Research Network is commendable. They have made significant strides in the past ten years, including joint research projects and clinical trials, resource mobilization as well as the development of relevant technologies, amongst others.

Beyond that, our Medicines Regulatory Authorities are ready to sign a MOU for cooperation, which is a significant step towards realizing our objective to work together in field of medical products regulation, enabling the sharing of regulatory experience and best practices, exchange of experts for capacity building as well as facilitation of regulatory landscape to promote R&D and adaptation through technology transfer of innovative medical products (drugs, vaccines and medical technologies), including in the context of concerns such as anti-microbial resistance.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I also wish to commend the government of Russia for convening the International Expert Forum on Nuclear Medicine of BRICS Countries, which was held on the 20th to 21st July 2023, which was aimed at facilitating the exchange of experience between nuclear medicine and radiopharmacy Experts from the BRICS countries on different topics. The topics covered areas like the use of advanced scientific developments in radionuclide diagnostics and therapy of various diseases; exchange of technologies of development and production of innovative radiopharmaceuticals as well as the training personnel in the sphere of nuclear medicine, to initiate effective cooperation with the common goal of improving the quality of life and reducing mortality of patients with oncological and non-oncological diseases.

Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

This year we have an opportunity to also exchange views and develop common positions during important health deliberations on pandemic prevention, preparedness, and response as well as issues on the

International Health Regulations (IHR), which were on the agenda of the 76th World Health Assembly. There are important discussions at the WHO and also in New York, in preparation for the three UNGA High- Level Meetings on health issues on UHC, TB and Pandemic Prevention, preparedness and response to be held in New York in September this year. These are in line with our priorities for the BRICS Health Sector, for G20 as well as our regions, including the African Union.

I therefore welcome you to South Africa and wish us all a productive and fruitful meeting and most importantly, that you take time to sample the splendor and beauty of our country and return back with your family and friends to sample more and the best of our country.

Ladies and Gentlemen

I therefore declare this meeting open.

I thank you