



In October 2024, six children tragically died after ingesting Terbufos, resulting in acute organophosphate poisoning. Autopsy findings confirmed the presence of Terbufos granules in their stomachs. While the exact route of exposure remains unclear, it is suspected that the children consumed food contaminated with Terbufos granules purchased from a local spaza shop. This incident highlighted the widespread and unsafe use of Terbufos in urban communities, where inadequate municipal waste management contributes to persistent rat and pest infestations. In desperation, residents often resort to hazardous chemical controls.

Following the incident, the National Joint Operational and Intelligence Structure (NATJOINTS) was activated to coordinate a multi-sectoral response. On 18 November 2024, foodborne illnesses were declared a National Disaster in terms of Section 23 of the Disaster Management Act. Prior to this, on 15 November 2024, the President addressed the nation following a special Cabinet meeting and announced key intervention measures aimed at protecting South Africans, particularly children from foodborne and chemical-related illnesses.

The first intervention is to get the hazardous pesticides off the streets.

The second critical intervention is to protect children from exposure to these substances.

The third critical intervention is to prevent future outbreaks.

The President also announced the following measures to be implemented with immediate effect:

To get hazardous pesticides off the street:

The spaza shops which have been implicated in the deaths of children will be closed with immediate effect.

All spaza shops and other food handling facilities must be registered within the municipalities in which they operate within 21 days from the date of the address. Any shop that is not registered within 21 days and does not meet all health standards and requirements will be closed.

The South African Police Service and other law enforcement agencies will be required to investigate, arrest and prosecute offenders. This will involve close cooperation with all registered manufacturers and suppliers.

Integrated multidisciplinary inspection teams will undertake compliance inspections of food handling facilities, manufacturers, distributors, wholesaler and retailers. This will include spaza shops and general dealers. Non-compliant businesses and shops linked to any poisoning incidents or found to unlawfully stock hazardous chemicals will be shut down.

A massive campaign of door-to-door inspection of all spaza shops, tuck shops and other informal traders will be undertaken, starting with Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal.

This will be undertaken by inter-disciplinary inspections teams consisting of the South African Military Health Services, Environmental Health Practitioners, the South African Police Service, the National Consumer Council, labour inspectors and others.

All registered manufacturers of Terbufos will be inspected to ensure that no products are diverted into the non-agricultural market. The supply chain process for distribution and sale of Terbufos will be investigated to ensure that controls are being adhered to and that there is accountability for who they sell to.

Regulations and protocols on the traceability, repackaging, destruction and sale of pesticides, insecticides and foodstuffs will be strengthened.

The second intervention is about the protection of children from exposure to harmful substances:

The Department of Basic Education will immediately issue a circular to Provincial Education Departments and all schools on best practice protocols for preventing and managing foodborne illnesses within schools.

By the start of the new school year, the Department of Basic Education and School Governing Bodies, together with the Department of Health, will review and update the guidelines for schools on the management of suppliers of foodstuffs to public schools. This will include tuck shops operated at these schools.

A public education campaign will be launched aimed at children, parents, caregivers and the broader community on food safety and the identification, handling and storage of dangerous chemicals. This campaign will involve GCIS, government departments and agencies, industry organisations and civil society formations.

This will be complemented by a public education campaign aimed at communities, spaza shops, tuck shops, informal traders and other retailers on health, safety and hygiene regulations, the identification of hazardous products, regulations that apply to hazardous products and legal consequences.

The Ministers of Basic Education and Health and other government departments will classify certain pesticides and insecticides not suitable for home use as “dangerous objects” that may not be brought or used on school premises. This will be undertaken in terms of the Regulations on Safety Measures for Public Schools.

The third intervention will be aimed at preventing future outbreaks:

The President directed that Joint Operational and Intelligence Structures be established at a national and provincial level to deal with this crisis.

Local municipalities will be required to take urgent action to address the problem of rat infestations by cleaning cities and towns and removing waste. All municipal landfill sites will be required to comply with National Environmental Management Waste Act. Failure to comply will result in strict sanctions that include directives, compliance notices and criminal enforcement.

A Ministerial Health Advisory Committee is being established to develop medium- and long-term prevention measures. This Committee will consist of experts such as toxicologists, paediatricians, chemical pathologists, epidemiologists, forensic pathologists and others. All deaths of patients 12 years and below will be made notifiable in the Notifiable Medical Condition Surveillance System.

Following the pronouncement by the President and to strengthen national response and preparedness, the Minister of Health, Dr Aaron Motsoaledi, appointed the Ministerial Advisory Committee (MAC) on Foodborne Illnesses. The Committee comprises 15 experts drawn from various health disciplines and is mandated to provide guidance on preventing future outbreaks, improving the availability and quality of public health data, and enhancing public awareness and health promotion efforts. The MAC was also tasked with evaluating the use and risks associated with Terbufos in South Africa. The Committee held its inception meeting on 16 December 2024, followed by several meetings from January 2025 onwards.

Based on its review of the evidence, the MAC made the following key recommendations:

- That Terbufos be banned with immediate effect.
- That the ban be supported by robust enforcement measures during implementation and continuously thereafter.
- That safer locally applicable alternatives to Terbufos be urgently identified, and an effective awareness campaign be implemented to support the transition to these alternatives.

These recommendations were presented to Cabinet on 11 June 2025. Cabinet approved the immediate ban on Terbufos, and this decision was subsequently announced through a presidential media briefing.

The MAC advisory is attached.