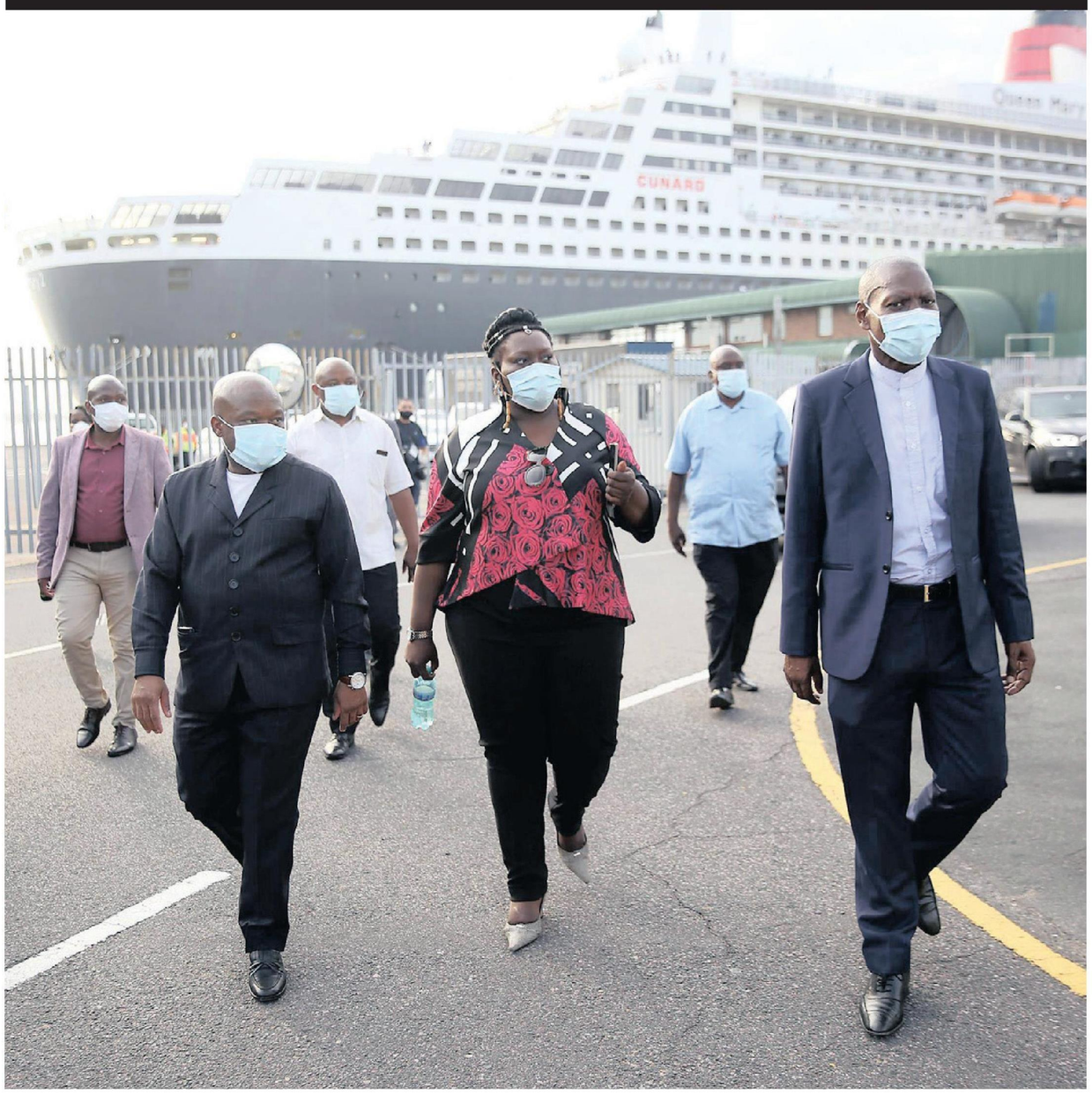
Publication: Mercury (First Edition)
Date: Wednesday, April 01, 2020
Page: 1

COVID-19

Deadly virus claims 3 lives in KZN

CALL FOR 6 000 CRUISE PASSENGERS TO GET TESTED



KWAZULU-NATAL Premier Sihle Zikalala, Health MEC Nomagugu Simelane-Zulu and Health Minister Zweli Mkhize at the Port of Durban where the Queen Mary 2, pictured in the background, docked to disembark six South Africans yesterday. | **MOTSHWARI MOFOKENG** African News Agency (ANA)

KAILENE PILLAY
kailene.pillay@inl.co.za

THE National Department of Health is calling on potentially more than 6000 people who travelled on two separate cruises aboard the MSC Orchestra – from Durban to Mozambique on February 28 and March 13 – to go to their local hospitals to get tested for the coronavirus.

Health Minister Dr Zweli Mkhize said yesterday that two passengers had tested positive for Covid-19.

One passenger who travelled on the cruise from February 28 to March 2, was from the Free State, while the other passenger who travelled on March 13 to 16, was from KwaZulu-Natal.

Mkhize said the department had already received a contact list of all passengers from both cruises to begin tracing them.

However, to assist the department, Mkhize called on all the passengers, especially those who might have had symptoms or were still displaying symptoms of the virus to go to their nearest hospitals.

"Even if they no longer have symptoms or may not have had any infection, they must still present themselves for testing. They must be made aware that one of the passengers on their cruise did test positive, and they need to approach a government medical institute or their medical doctor to be screened."

After the first patient tested positive – the passenger who was on the cruise on March 13 – the department made contact with the MSC cruise liner, which was ensuring that all passengers and crew members were informed.

Mkhize was at Durban Port yesterday as the Queen Mary 2 docked, after lying at anchor since last Friday.

The luxury cruise liner was awaiting approval to dock in Durban.

The six South Africans who were on the vessel were tested for Covid-19 and their results were negative. However, they will be kept in quarantine for the next 14 days while awaiting their results from a second test that was administered yesterday.

They appeared in good spirits, waving to Mkhize, KZN health MEC Nomagugu Simelane-Zulu and Premier Sihle Zikalala as they disembarked and made their way to the on-site testing area that was set up at the port.

The vessel will refuel and restock supplies before setting sail for Southampton in the UK.

The ship's line, Cunard, announced earlier this month that it had ended its three international voyages early in response to the coronavirus pandemic.

There are 1215 crew and 264 passengers presently on board.

The vessel was already on her way to South Africa when the South African government imposed a ban on cruise ships entering local ports from March 18. The regulations prohibit any disembarkations apart from returning South African citizens or permanent residents, and prohibit embarkations unless they are for departing foreign nationals.

Victims include a leading SA scientist in Aids research and an uMlazi primary school teacher

LYSE COMINS

ONE of South Africa's leading scientists, Dr Gita Ramjee, is among three people in KwaZulu-Natal who died of Covid-19 complications in the past 48 hours.

Ramjee, of Westville, previously served as a chief specialist scientist and director of the South African Medical Research Council's HIV Prevention Research Unit, and contributed substantially to advancing HIV prevention science among women in South Africa.

It is believed she had recently travelled to London, where both her sons live, and had taken ill on her return.

She died at a Durban hospital. Her cremation took place yesterday.

Her husband, a pharmacist, is in isolation.

Tholakele Patience Shandu, 46, of uMlazi, a teacher at a primary school in Isipingo Hills, died earlier this week after she was admitted to hospital for hypertension and asthma.

She subsequently tested positive for Covid-19, Health Minister Zweli Mkhize said yesterday.

"We wish to convey our condolences to her loved ones," he said.

Her sister, who did not want to be named, said they received a call from the hospital yesterday morning informing them of the tragic news.

"We were not allowed to visit her while she was in hospital, and things got worse since the announcement of the lockdown last week.

"There is a lot we have not been told, but we know that she had the virus, and before she tested positive, two other family members also tested positive for Covid-19," she said

KwaZulu-Natal MEC for Education, Kwazi Mshengu, said the department had already received confirmation that one of its employees had died due to the coronavirus.

"We have also discovered that a friend of the deceased, who fetched her from hospital, has also been infected. Among her family members, it's believed there is a pupil from one of the local schools who is also infected with the virus."

Mshengu said they were trying to get confirmation of this from the Health Department before taking any further steps.

"If this is found to be true, we will have to take all teachers from this school and other people who might have come into contact with her for testing as per the department's regulations," said Mshengu.

South African Democratic Teachers Union KZN secretary Nomarashiya Caluza said: "Her colleague who fetched her from hospital is said to have returned to teach because the schools were still operating. Even though we are not supposed to panic, this information worries us. We are praying that there won't be mass infections..."

Meanwhile, The Islamic Burial Council (IBC) confirmed it had performed the first burial of a person infected with the virus in KZN yesterday.

Dr Gita Ramjee

Tholakele Patience Shandu

In a statement, IBC spokesperson Salim Kazi said the burial was carried out by its task team.

"We do confirm that we had the first Muslim case of Covid-19 and followed all protocol and regulations set down by the Department of Health.

"We have just got a message back from the department saying they were highly impressed with the way that we handled this."

No further details about this case were available at the time of publication.

By yesterday afternoon, South Africa had 1353 confirmed cases of infection.

Last night tributes poured in for Ramjee from around the world.

Professor Glenda Gray, the South African Medical Research Council president and chief executive, said in a message to colleagues: "We are deeply saddened to inform you of the tragic passing of Prof Gita Ramjee in hospital today. Prof Ramjee died of Covid-19-related complications. We are sincerely grateful for her contributions to HIV prevention and for the role she played in our lives. Our thoughts and prayers are with her family. May her soul rest in peace."

The director of the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Centre for the Aids Programme of Research in South Africa, Professor Salim Karim, said the country had lost a leading scientist.

"We have lost one of our leading Aids researchers. She had devoted many years of selfless service to research to address the Aids problem in our country," Karim said.

He said he had previously worked with her at the Medical Research Council and she was initially involved in paediatric kidney research.

"I recruited her back in 1994 and brought her in, and she very rapidly became one of our top researchers and became like my deputy for a while. When I left the MRC she took over the HIV research unit I was running, and we maintained a close personal friendship," Karim said.

University of KwaZulu-Natal Centre for HIV/Aids Networking Forum former board member Stewart Kilburn said he was shocked to hear of her death and that it was a huge loss to the scientific community. He said she would be remembered as an "outstanding scientist" for her prevention work regarding HIV/Aids.

Professor Umesh Lalloo, pulmonologist, chair of the Enhancing Care Foundation and former dean of the Nelson Mandela Medical School, said that the death of Professor Ramjee was an enormous tragedy and loss to the medical research community in South Africa.

"She pioneered research into preventive strategies in HIV in women in particular, and was internationally respected for her contributions. Her passing away must not be in vain and must serve to remind us of the enormous challenges that Covid-19 poses to the world.

"We have to protect ourselves and our communities against this global scourge. Our heartfelt condolences go to her family," he said.

At the time of her death, Ramjee was the chief scientific officer for HIV Prevention at health impact organisation, the Aurum Institute.

Group chief executive Gavin Churchyard said: "The world has lost a bold and compassionate leader in the response to HIV. Gita firmly believed in health as a fundamental human right. Her groundbreaking research in HIV prevention contributed to the global response to HIV and Aids. Our thoughts during this difficult time are with her family, colleagues and the many people her life and work touched."

Ramjee held an honorary professorship from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, and was considered a critical player in the field of HIV prevention clinical trials.

She obtained her doctorate at the University of Natal (now the University of KwaZulu-Natal).

Ramjee was world renowned for her specialist work in HIV prevention and treatment research. She was involved in integrated care programmes among women and men in communities around the greater Durban area.

She published more than 200 research articles and was a reviewer and editor of several scientific journals, and a member of local and international committees and advisory groups, including the Academy of Science of South Africa and the South African National Aids Council.

This material has been copied under a Dalro licence and is not for resale or retransmission.