

The real numbers: Without the much-needed NHI, we might as well start preparing graves – IOL 13 July 2020

JOHANNESBURG - Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni has likened Covid-19 to what happens during war time. Museveni told his nation that in a war situation, nobody asks anyone to stay indoors.

You stay indoors by choice.

In fact, if you have a basement, you hide there for as long as hostilities persist. In Italy and Brazil, harrowing images of fields upon fields of graves have shocked the world. Now our turn is nigh.

Gauteng Health MEC Dr Bandile Masuku last week pointed to the digging of graves in preparation for the eventuality. Masuku alluded to 1.5 million graves in Gauteng.

He said the figure was not based on expected deaths but on the overall graves capacity in the province. In a country where corruption has become the norm, many concluded that there was a tender out for the digging of graves.

Others said the preparation of the burial sites was a sign that the country had accepted defeat. The reality is that the grim moment of death is upon us, and the infection curve is an asymptote.

The lockdown gave South Africa time to build the capacity for those who will need critical care. But as the first instinct of a society gripped by death is to rush to hospital at the slightest prospect of feeling ill, our health facilities are overwhelmed. Not that we did not know that primary health care is important. Former health minister Aaron Motsoaledi's drive for the National Health Insurance (NHI) was labelled unaffordable.

Not only did Motsoaledi not get the necessary resources to implement the strategy, he found himself in an unenviable position where a few community health-care workers at his disposal began to toyi-toyi that his stipend was too little.

Evidence shows that the NHI is a non-negotiable imperative.

The announcement of the digging of graves by Masuku reminds me of the Desert Fox, Erwin Rommel, whose state funeral was prepared by Hitler before he could even die. All arrangements and regiments were alerted to prepare for a state funeral of a yet-to-be-announced death.

Two generals asked Rommel to choose between taking poison or being dragged through court martial for plotting to overthrow Hitler. Rommel chose poison, and the planned funeral took place. Masuku is not planning to kill Rommel, he is being realistic.

Perhaps it is a sign of defeat, but it would be foolhardy not to prepare burial sites in the light of what is clearly coming. In a country that refuses to heed science and facts, such as the implementation of the NHI, we all plan to fail.