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Republic of Botswana

MINISTRY OF HEALTH & WELLNESS
PRIVATE BAG 0038
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PRESS RELEASE

STATEMENT ON THE NEW COVID-19 VARIANT

The Ministry of Health and Wellness wishes to inform members of the public that it is currently investigating certain mutations of the SARS COV-2 virus that was widely reported on social media, including international media, in the last two days. Four cases of the new variant were reported by our local scientists as part of the country's routine genomic surveillance of SARS-COV-2. This variant is called B.1.1.529.

This new virus was detected on four foreign nationals who had entered Botswana on the 7th November 2021, on a diplomatic mission. The quartet tested positive for COVID-19 on the 11th November 2021 as they were preparing to return. Further genomic sequencing that was conducted on the samples confirmed the virus as B. 1. 1. 529 on 24 November 2021.

Immediate results of the ongoing investigations show that the new virus has many mutations, some of which have previously been characterised. The ministry is conducting further investigations and sample analysis to gain more knowledge and understanding about the properties and behaviour of this virus. Contrary to speculations and in some cases insinuations by some that the variant was only detected in Botswana, the truth is that the variant has so far been detected in other countries in Africa and beyond.

Although all the four cases have since left the country, contact tracing is ongoing. **All contacts who have so far been identified in the country, have no COVID-19 symptoms and have tested negative for COVID-19.** As already indicated, more intimate and complex analysis of new COVID-19 positive cases are being conducted to search any trace of this new virus. Since this is a new development, information on the virus is still evolving and no major conclusions can be drawn as yet.

Therefore, the ministry calls upon members of the public not to panic, but remain vigilant and continue adhering to all COVID-19 protocols.

Any further developments regarding this issue will be shared with the public.

Thank you.

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'PP S B M W'.

Dr Christopher Nyanga
For Permanent Secretary