COMMITTEE ON COGTA BRIEFED ON STATE OF READINESS FOR WINTER SEASON INITIATION SCHOOLS AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE BILL ONCE ENACTED INTO LAW

On the evening of Tuesday, 30 April 2021, the Portfolio Committee on Corporative Governance and Traditional Affairs was briefed on the provincial state of readiness for the 2021 winter initiation season and the state of readiness for the implementation of the Customary Initiation Bill, which may soon be enacted into law by the President.

The Members of the committee were briefed by the Department of Corporative Governance and Traditional Affairs (CoGTA), as well as the National House of Traditional Leaders (NHTL) who revealed that 13 fatalities were recorded during the December initiation school season in the Eastern Cape.

Mr Abram Sithole, who is the Chief Executive Officer of the NHTL, said that fatalities occurred as a result of dehydration and an alleged shooting incident which is being investigated by the police.

“What we have been able to gather is that when boys know that they are about to attend the initiation school, they stop to drink water for a couple of weeks, because they believe a myth which says that a wound heals faster when the body is dehydrated. Others even stop to drink water three weeks before they go to the initiation school and, when they get there, they are dehydrated already,” said Mr Sithole.

The committee Chairperson, Ms Faith Muthambi, expressed shock at the fatalities, and called for accountability. She said that those who are tasked with monitoring initiation schools in the province should be invited to explain as to what went wrong, because the province had a risk-adjusted plan to prevent such eventualities.

Ms Muthambi further tasked CoGTA and the NHTL that they should, in the earliest time, provide the committee with a comprehensive report regarding the fatalities. According to her, the report should include, among other things, the number of initiates that were discharged with injuries and support given to the bereaved families.

The committee concluded unanimously that initiation schools in the Eastern Cape require a serious intervention.

Also, Members of the committee heard that CoGTA is ready to implement the Customary Initiation Bill as soon as it is enacted into law by President Cyril Ramaphosa.

Once enacted into law, the Customary Initiation Act will make provision for the establishment of the national and provincial initiation oversight committees. Section 40(1) of the Bill says that a national initiation oversight committee should be established within 90 days of the law coming into effect. The department told committee Members that it is ready to implement this legislative imperative.

Section 20(2) of the Customary Initiation Bill makes it compulsory to conduct the screening of initiation school principals, traditional surgeons, care-givers and traditional health practitioners. It also regulates the minimum requirements for the registration of traditional surgeons, as well as the development of acceptable standards relating to discipline at initiation schools.

Furthermore, Members of the committee heard that the Eastern Cape is the only province in the country with a specific law that regulates initiation schools, namely the Eastern Cape Customary Male Initiation Practice Act of 2016.

Ms Muthambi advised the department to make provision for the inclusion of an implementation plan of the Customary Initiation Bill into its 2021/22 annual performance.

“She said, in conclusion: “Our role as Parliament does not stop with the conclusion of the legislative process, but continues in respect of monitoring and oversight. We will therefore be continuously engaging all the relevant stakeholders as to be kept abreast of developments in the implementation of this important statute.”

**By Justice Molafo**

**31 March 2021**