



MPs during a plenary session in recently. Parliament passed supplementary Budgets to reinforce Covid-19 fight. PHOTO/ PARLIAMENT PRESS UNIT.

How Parliament stepped-up fight against Covid-19

Parliament took the fight to another level by taking precautionary measures as an institution, including abandoning parliamentary chambers and erecting tents for plenary, approving and providing vehicles to the Ministry of Health to transport health workers whenever and wherever they would be needed across the country as well as sending members to the National Task Force on Covid-19.

BY MONITOR REPORTER

Despite media reports and public condemnation of Parliament's allocation of USh10 billion (\$2.81 million) in the fight against Covid-19 at the start of the pandemic in April 2020, it later came out clearly that the allocation in the supplementary budget was intended to facilitate different organs of Government (publicly funded entities) to provide emergency response services to the pandemic.

President Yoweri Museveni had declared a national lockdown a couple of weeks earlier and every department of the government was trying to mobilise resources to join the fight against the virus that had brought the world to its knees in just less than three months.

Throughout the period, as the pandemic pounded Ugandans, killing over 2,500 and straining the health service delivery in all medical facilities including referral hospitals as they struggled for COVID-19 related health support items such as oxygen, the parliament has been actively involved.

While the scientists took the lead in advising the country on the next course of action after the first case of the disease was diagnosed on March 22, the Parliament backed all efforts by raising awareness, passing necessary supplementary budgets to address health gaps as well as considering budgets for food or fund distribution to vulnerable people affected by the pandemic and its attendant prevention measures as well as appropriating money for recovery by small and medium business enterprises.

The Parliament took the fight to another level by taking precautionary measures as an institution, including abandoning parliamentary chambers and erecting tents for plenary, approving and providing vehicles to the Ministry of Health to transport health workers whenever and wherever they would be needed across the country as well as sending members to the National Task Force on Covid-19.

The Parliament also appointed a committee in June 2021 to assess the success of COVID-19 prevention measures as well as assess the readiness of the district health cen-

tres and regional referral hospitals to handle an upsurge of COVID-19 patients.

The Parliament Technical Task Force on Covid-19 has in the course of its work, visited and assessed the readiness of health facilities to manage Covid-19. Additionally, during the visits, it has assessed awareness levels of the district leadership and communities about Covid-19; interacted with different teams in the areas they have visited to sort out underlying issues which may affect managing health crises; assessed the impact of funds allocated to different districts to the needs on the ground, and assessed the readiness of health facilities to ably handle cases of other long-standing and pre-existing health conditions which are not necessarily Covid-19.

The Parliament Covid-19 Technical Taskforce also assessed the state and welfare of the medical workers as they deliver the essential services and ensure that all medical workers across the country are catered for in as far as Personal Protective Equipment goes.

From their interactions with different medical officers, they discovered several issues such as the fact that drugs used in the treatment of Covid-19 are not in the ministry's line of essential drugs such as vitamin C, Vitamin D and, therefore, cannot be supplied by National Medical Stores to the Health Centre IVs, the lack of ambulances to transport patients that need urgent care, and or attention and the need for massive production of oxygen that is necessary for patients

facing breathing difficulties.

Their recommendations will form part of the national response in the fight against the disease, as well as formulation of guidelines for vaccination. For example, some MPs asked that the vaccine be distributed to the high-risk groups around the country.

In major issues affecting the people such as this pandemic or an outbreak, MPs are the first point of call before any government interventions are implemented in constituencies. Members of Parliament are under so much pressure to deliver and need to respond to issues raised in their constituencies before government reaches them, and this is exactly what is happening with the Covid-19 pandemic.

And despite the threats of the pandemic, in which some Members of Parliament lost their lives, the House kept conducting business to ensure the country continues functioning even when faced with very difficult circumstances.

MORE INITIATIVES

Task Force

Parliament appointed a committee in 2021 to assess the success of Covid-19 prevention measures as well as the readiness of District health centres and regional referral hospitals to handle an upsurge of Covid-19 patients. Parliament technical task force on Covid-19 visited and assessed the readiness of health facilities to manage Covid-19. The Covid-19 technical task force also



Speaker of Parliament, Jacob L. Oulanyah. PHOTO/ PARLIAMENT PRESS UNIT.

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Inside Parliament's committee report on Covid-19 relief funds



Deputy Speaker of Parliament Anita Among in procession into the Parliamentary chamber for plenary. PHOTO/PARLIAMENT PRESS UNIT.

The task force issued a detailed report that showed several inconsistencies within the finance and health ministry's handling of the pandemic and made several of recommendations.

BY MONITOR REPORTER

In its oversight role, the Parliamentary task force on the national Covid-19 response recently presented its report, highlighting mismanagement of funds, discrepancies, and poor health sector preparedness after weeks of traversing the country.

At the height of the second wave of the Covid-19 in Uganda, Deputy Speaker Anita Among, constituted a Parliamentary task force on the national Covid-19 response to carry out specific oversight tasks to boost the legislature's efforts in monitoring governance and service delivery.

Among these was to inquire into and report on government's preparedness and response to Covid-19, provide an assessment of the health impacts of Covid-19 in the community and country at large, assess operation, and adminis-

tration and management of funds and other resources appropriated for them to manage the pandemic.

Other roles of the committee were to assess the role of private-sector health care providers in Covid-19 management, carry out field visits to assess the state of the healthcare system in the regional referral hospitals, both selected general hospitals and the lower health facilities, conduct sensitisation and awareness programmes on mass media to educate the population, and prepare and submit a report to Parliament.

The Task Force was comprised of eight representatives of Parliament to the national task force and four regional teams for the west, central, eastern, and northern regions of the country.

The Task Force conducted field activities in the regions following its terms of reference, including visiting several government hospitals at all levels to assess their preparedness and equipment to fight the pandemic and also appeared on several media talk shows.

Key findings

After weeks of deliberations, the task force issued a detailed report that showed several inconsistencies within the Ministry of Finance and Ministry of Health handling of the pandemic and made a raft of recommendations.

During the first lockdown last year, the government had indicated that it would give a stimulus package to businesses affected by the lockdown, and

funds were allocated through Parliament to the recapitalisation of the Uganda Development Bank.

"The Government, through the Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development should submit to Parliament full accountability backed by an authentic list of beneficiaries of the funds appropriated in respect to the recapitalization of Uganda Development Bank totalling to Shs558.18b," the report noted.

The report added that additional allocation to support SACCOs under the Uganda Microfinance Support Centre totalling Shs77.72b (\$21.8m) meant to enable small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) to access quick and affordable credit to turn around their businesses that were on the verge of collapsing should too be accounted for.

The committee further noted that whereas there is still a deficit in the required budgetary allocation towards procurement of the much-needed vaccines to the tune of Shs365.9b, the government was still spending huge sums of money on Covid-19 containment measures instead of prioritising mass vaccination.

The task force also noted a series of discrepancies of the money allocated to the Covid-19 fight for example Parliament appropriated Shs94.18b (\$26.4m) under supplementary Budget Schedule 1.

The Ministry of Health in its submis-

REPORT

Key issues

The task force noted a series of discrepancies of money allocated to the covid-19 fight. For example, Parliament appropriated Shs94.188b under supplementary Budget schedule 1. Ministry of Health in its submission to the task force indicated that by the end of FY 2019-20 in June 2020, a total of Shs92.431b had been spent, leaving a balance. The report noted that government should undertake realistically and harmonised planning with a view of ascertaining the optimal level of financing required for the Covid-19 resurgence plan by prioritising critical issues.

of Shs92.4b (\$25.9m) had been spent, leaving a balance of Shs1.75b (\$494,311) unspent and the balance returned to the consolidated fund.

"A review of the detailed breakdown of the actual expenditure submitted to the Taskforce revealed a total of Ush99.06b (\$27.9m) as having been spent instead of the reported Shs92.4b (\$26.02m).

The task force noted that this figure is over and above the appropriated amount by Ush4.8 billion (\$1.35 million). The source of the additional funds totalling Shs4.88b (\$1.37m) remains unknown," the report reads.

Another discrepancy was found in the purchase and national wide distribution of fabric masks with analysis revealing a discrepancy in both the reported number of fabric masks procured and distributed 1,214,202 and the amount of money received and spent Shs2.91b (\$819,820) on the procurement of the fabric masks.

The report noted that government should undertake realistically and harmonised planning with a view of ascertaining the optimal level of financing required for the Covid-19 resurgence plan which should take into account critical interventions that should be implemented to contain the transmission of Covid-19.

The committee was informed that government through the national taskforce and District taskforces received both cash and donations in-kind. The donations in-kind included vehicles, mattresses, beds and beddings, sanitisers, test kits, Personal Protective Equipment (PPEs), and food items, among others.

While the committee commended all persons and organisations for the support provided at the critical time of need, it noted that there were inadequacies when it came to the accountability of donations received.

"Indeed this is also confirmed in the auditor general's report on thematic audit report on Covid-19 pandemic government interventions dated February 2021. This report provides findings of the auditor general in respect to the management of Covid-19 interventions for the FY 2019/2020. At an appropriate time the accountability committees of Parliament shall review it and make recommendations for the appropriate resolutions," the report reads.



MPs on the parliamentary Covid-19 task force, central region, tour Masaka hospital to access the preparedness to handle the second wave of the pandemic in Uganda. PHOTO/PARLIAMENT PRESS UNIT.

Legislators respond to voters' plight

More than half of the current legislators have bought and deployed several ambulances within their constituencies to boost the already present ones by the ministry of health. With the numbers of patients rising, there was a need of more ambulances to evacuate sick people from their homes to health centres near them or the critical ones from the health facilities to referral hospitals. The legislators pulled together over 200 ambulances, which were added onto the national response fleet of ambulances to save lives.

BY MONITOR REPORTER

When the first case of coronavirus was detected in Uganda on March 21, 2020, the announcement did not only scare Ugandans, including their leaders, but it also drove the leaders, especially Members of Parliament to act in efforts to rescue their constituents. Many of them went out of their way and legal mandate of legislation to the rescue of constituents whose livelihoods had been greatly affected by the pandemic and its ensuing lockdowns.

Uganda went into a total lockdown in March last year and because of its effect on businesses, and people's livelihoods, Members of Parliament have since found themselves at the front line of supporting several vulnerable people in their constituencies using personal resources to provide relief through cash and food donations.

Several legislators have talked of the hustle and bustle to ensure that their people survive the pandemic-infused hunger and retain dignity.

Kira Municipality Member of Parliament Mr Ssemujju Ibrahim

Nganda said being members of parliament, the people who they represented automatically expected them to come to their rescue in such a time of need.

He added that occasionally, on very many mornings, he would wake up to lines outside his gate of constituents requesting support, most of them wanting just what to eat for that day.

"I could not chase them away just because my work is only to legislate. I had to always find ways to help them survive. It is not that we have the money but we have to help in whichever we can," Ssemujju said.

For new entrants in parliament, the coronavirus pandemic has already taken a toll on them. Just weeks after they were sworn in, the country was hit by a deadly second wave of the coronavirus with the delta variant ravaging communities and claiming hundreds of lives, prompting the country to go back into a lockdown of 42 days.

The lockdown took a toll on the population, especially in urban and peri-urban centres around the country where many especially those in the informal sector live hand to mouth, those in markets,



Assistance. I could not chase them away just because my work is only to legislate. I had to find ways to help them survive. It is not that we have the money but we have to help whenever we can," MP Ssemujju Nganda.

boda boda riders, taxi touts, and many others.

Whereas the government announced that it will be giving about 500,000 of these a relief package of Shs100,000 to cushion them, this was but a drop in the ocean compared to the number of people who needed relief and to some who got it, it was not enough to feed their families for that period. They, as they first impulse rushed to the MPs.

Mr Karim Masaba is a first-timer in parliament representing a new constituency of the Mbale Industrial division in Mbale district.



Responsibility. All people needed help and by default they look at us legislators. They are our people even when we cannot afford to help each one adequately. It is the little we have to share to survive," MP Masaba Karim.

He tells of hundreds of families and individuals that he has personally helped from out of his pocket.

Some have reached out on telephone, his constituency office while others; especially the youth chose social media to reach out.

"All these people need help and by default, they look at us legislators. They are our people even when we cannot afford to help each one adequately. It is the little we have to share with everyone so we can survive," Mr Masaba said.

Many other MPs came in to boost the efforts of the country's health

sector that had taken a lot of pressure from the pandemic. With hospitals around the country filled up with covid-19 patients at one point, and no lifesaving oxygen in most of these health facilities, some members of Parliament took to buying hospital equipment for regional and district hospitals such as beds, oxygen cylinders, and sometimes drugs.

More than half of the current legislators have bought and deployed several ambulances within their constituencies to boost the already present ones by the ministry of health. With the numbers of patients rising, there was a need for more ambulances to evacuate sick people from their homes to health centres near them or the critical ones from the health facilities to referral hospitals. The legislators pulled together over 200 ambulances, which were added onto the national response fleet of ambulances to save lives.

Some Members of Parliament have set up health centres to cater to their constituents; some of which have been handed over to the government for management. A case in point is the PRIME Minister who built a health centre for her people in Kakumiro as well as Mohammed Ssegirinya whose health facility in Kawempe has been welcomed by the populace.

MPS SUPPORT

Humanitarianism

Whereas the government announced that it would give out Shs100,000 to cushion them against the devastating effects of Covid-19.



MP Namayingo District, Margaret Makoha interacting with a nurse at Lolwe health centre III. PHOTO/ PARLIAMENT PRESS UNIT.

Covid-19 spending should reflect efforts – Katuntu

The parliamentary committee on Covid-19 recently traversed the country to find out impact of Covid-19 on the population and find ways of how to help health facilities respond to the pandemic. The chairperson, Mr Abdu Katuntu spoke to *Daily Monitor's* **TOM BRIAN ANGURINI** about the findings and below are the extracts.

What was the impact of Covid-19 on the health sector?

First of all, the health sector was not prepared to handle a pandemic of this magnitude it grappled with it, went towards a direction of the unknown. Many regional hospitals were overwhelmed with patients and did not know how to respond. Their response systems broke down.

Did you find health facilities with drugs and Intensive Care Units in place?

During the financial year 2019/2020, Parliament appropriated a total of sh22.18 billion to support the establishment of 20 isolation centres in each district and to undertake surveillance as a means of slowing down disease transmission.

However, while on field visits to various districts, the committee teams established that in most of these districts, not a single isolation center ever existed.

Moreover, in over 90 percent of health facilities, there were no specialists such as doctors and nurses who would handle an emergency of that magnitude. Even if the intensive care units were there, still there would be no trained personnel to man them. Such a lack of specialists meant that ordinary doctors and nurses without specialty were the ones handling Covid-19 patients. This was endangering the lives of both the patients and the doctors or health caregivers themselves.

What was the situation like in regional referral hospitals admitting these patients?

There were two scenarios. one, patients who were suffering from other diseases were not being attended to by health workers as doctors and nurses were busy concentrating on Covid-19 patients.

Many patients suffering from other sicknesses met their deaths at home since many feared to go to health facilities that were admitting Covid-19 patients.

Two, there were hardly enough specialists to handle the large numbers of Covid-19 patients flocking the hospitals.

So, what was being done for the non-Covid-19 patients?

Many of these people went to private health facilities. Unfortunately, the private health facilities took advantage of the situation by charging a lot of money in millions yet these people were already feeling the pinch associated with the lockdown. There was simply no



An MP gets a Covid-19 jab at Parliament recently. PHOTO/ PARLIAMENT PRESS UNIT.

FACES BEHIND THE PARLIAMENTARY COMMITTEE ON COVID-19



Dr Joseph Ruyonga, Hoima West Division MP (NRM)



Dr Emmanuel Otaala, West Buganda County South Tororo District (NRM)



Dr Charles Ayume, Koboko Municipality Koboko District (NRM)



Dr Michael Bukenya, Bukuya County Kassanda District (NRM)

money.

How about health sector infrastructure on ground?

Most health centers were lacking basic infrastructures like ICU for critical cases and high dependency units for serious cases. For example, in the whole of Northern Uganda, there was only one Covid-19 CT scan in Oyam District. The whole country had a poor ambulance service run by government. There were 126 ambulances compared to more than 460 ambulances needed for the emergency cases and referral system to work. Out of the 25 ICU ambulances needed per district, only five were working. This affected the transportation of patients from health facilities to their places of referral.

Another issue was the utility bills such as water and electricity. In most health centres, they were not paid. Therefore, you would find a health facility with an ICU unit, but cannot put it in use because there is no power.

After your findings, what was government's response?

The Cabinet directed the Ministry of Health to provide non-medical and reusable face masks totalling 34,109,085 to all persons above six years of age.

In addition, as a pre-requisite to the reopening of schools, the cabinet directed that all learners should be provided with fabric masks. Therefore, this necessitated a procurement of an additional 2,592,963 masks for finalists in candidate classes. Consequently, a total of 36,702,048 masks at sh2,400 per mask were procured and distributed to 135 districts and all finalist learners across the country," reads the report.

However, the committee found out

that a review of the Ministry of Health accountability of Covid-19 funding (March 2020 to June 2021) reveals that a total of sh90.99 billion shillings was spent in respect to the procurement of fabric masks for communities (35,323,287) and finalist learners (2,592,963) totalling to 37,916,250 which is different from figures submitted by the health minister, Ruth Aceng in her report dated July 7, 2021.

The analysis reveals a discrepancy in both the reported number of fabric masks procured and distributed (1,214,202) and the amount of money received and spent (2,914 billion) on procurement of the fabric masks.

What did you do after finding this Ministry of Health report?

The committee recommends that the Minister of Health should explain the discrepancy arising from her report.

The Parliament task force on the National Covid-19 response also recommends that government submits detailed accountability to Parliament.

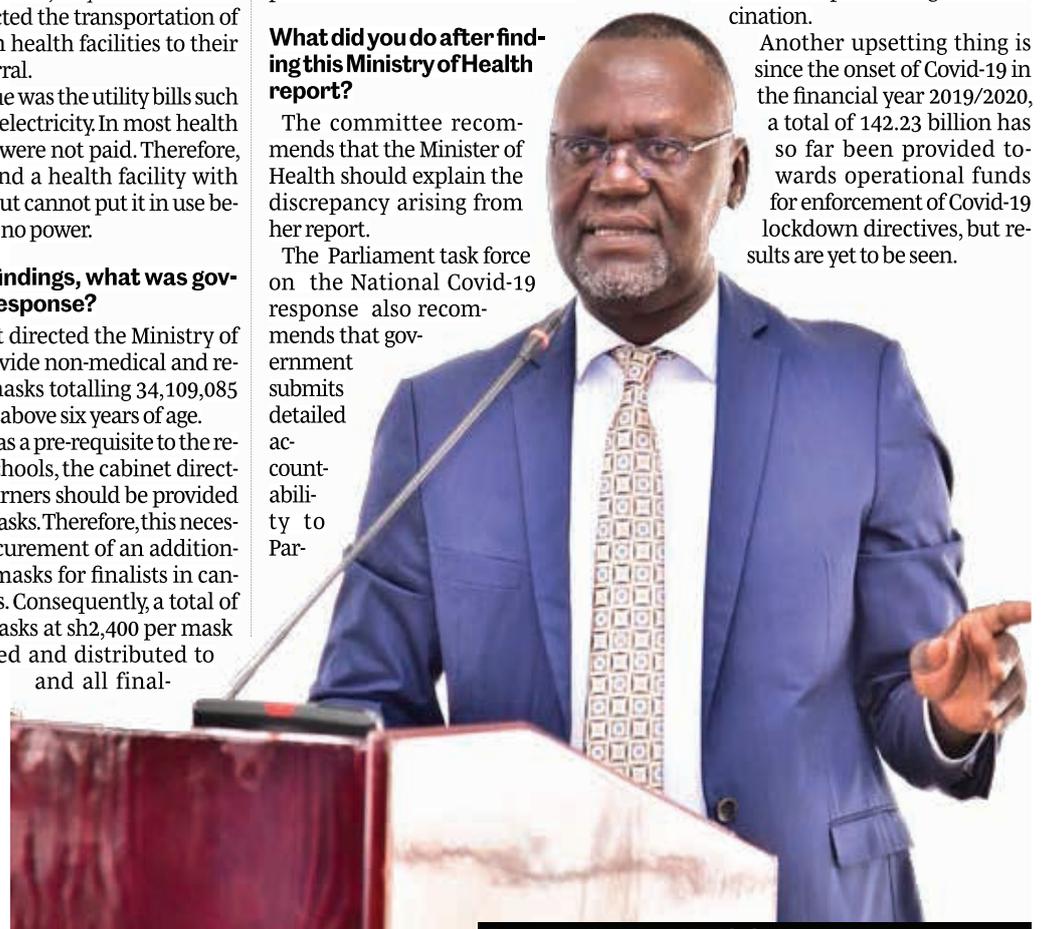
in each district where such facilities were established.

We asked the Auditor General to investigate all resources that have been geared towards the pandemic fight and any government official found guilty must be brought to book.

What are your disappointments?

Whereas there is still a deficit of the required budgetary allocation towards procurement of the much-needed vaccines to the tune of sh365.9b, the government is still spending huge sums of money on Covid-19 containment measures instead of prioritizing mass vaccination.

Another upsetting thing is since the onset of Covid-19 in the financial year 2019/2020, a total of 142.23 billion has so far been provided towards operational funds for enforcement of Covid-19 lockdown directives, but results are yet to be seen.



Bugweri County MP, Abdu Katuntu. PHOTO/FILE

MPs raise flag on cost of Covid-19 testing, treatment



The general public take advantage of the Covid-19 vaccination exercise at Parliament on June 1, 2021. PHOTO/ COURTESY.

MPs said government should put up measures to help patients suffering from other diseases to get the required treatment. Since the outbreak of the second wave of Covid-19, some medical facilities revised their treatment rates upwards.

A Member of Parliament (MP) raised a red flag, on the floor of Parliament, over the exorbitant fees charged by a private facility to carry out COVID-19 tests. Supported by other Members of the House, the Kween County MP, Abdi Fadhil Chemaswet asked the Ministry of Health to review the high cost of mandatory Covid-19 PCR test conducted at Entebbe International Airport.

The cost of testing has not only been a concern in the House but also in the public sphere where members of the public have complained that the cost is too high for an average Ugandan, leaving most people with the symptoms of Covid-19 to either start on self-medication or go to hospital when they are way too sick. This delay to go to hospital has been blamed for the highest percentage of death, according to the Ministry of Health.

The test costs US\$65 (about Ush230,000) which the MP said is a scheme that only benefits private laboratories stationed at the airport's immediate outskirts to con-

duct the test. The cost of the tests in most of the private entities ranges between \$28 (about sh100,000) and \$65 (about sh230,000).

Chemaswet says since the newly arrived Afghan refugees were tested at the government expense, the government should emulate neighbouring Tanzania, where the testing is at the expense of the government, although the minister of health Jane Ruth Aceng defended the cost, saying all countries are conducting the tests and that Uganda's costs are relatively cheaper.

"Globally, all airports are screening and testing people to prevent the importation of new variants; the tests are a result of a collaboration between Ministry of Health, Uganda Civil Aviation Authority, and the private sector," she said.

This is not the first time Parliament is concerned about the costs involved in the COVID-19. Members had raised concerns and asked government to urgently intervene and rein in private medical facilities that are charging Covid-19 patients an arm and a leg.

They said government should put up measures to help patients suffering from other diseases to get the required treatment. Since the outbreak of the second wave of Covid-19, some medical facilities revised their treatment rates upwards.

Many of these facilities charge the patients between Shs 2 million and Shs 5 million per day spent in the ICU. Some hospitals also require patients to pay an upfront admission fee ranging between Shs 5 million and Shs 10 million.

But MPs said these exorbitant fees are making a bad situation worse. "They are cheating the poor Ugandans," said one of the MPs. "This is going to lead to more loss of lives."

The MPs asked the government to earmark some resources to clear medical bills for Covid-19 patients in ICU's as it's becoming expensive for their families to meet the bills.

The MPs said with the current crisis, public hospitals have limited capacity to take on all patients that require ICU services compelling the affected persons to rush to the expensive private hospitals.

This was also mentioned to the officials from the ministry of Finance

who appeared before the committee on COVID-19, led by ministers Matia Kasajja and Henry Musasizi. The legislators suggested that there is a need for government to earmark some resources to meet medical bills for Covid-19 patients that have been referred to ICUs of various hospitals.

MPs said some patients in ICUs have lost properties after mortgaging them to the money lenders in pursuit of the resources to pay the medical bills. They opposed the proposal by the Ministry of Health to use a third party to enable the country to access the Covid-19 vaccine saying the country may end

MOTION

Opposed motion

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up getting poor quality vaccines at a high cost.

The legislators also raised concern over the enforcement of presidential directives on curfew and other related measures aimed at controlling the spread of the disease, saying the enforcers must be restrained from brutalizing people.

WHAT THE PUBLIC SAYS



Mr David Vosh Ajuma, Journalist

Parliament has a lot to do but appears not doing enough. However, the fight against Covid-19 is a big job.



Mr Derrick Ochieng

Let the 11th Parliament restore people's hope in so that the voters have the assurance that Parliament will support them in the fight against the pandemic.



Mr Ronald Nassasira, a journalist

It is the Parliament's responsibility to legislate about priorities for every expenditure that government incurs for accountability. We are happy with the way they took the role.