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**Loliondo pilgrimage marred by deaths and accidents**

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The Tanzanian government has confirmed that six people have died as they tried to reach or after they left Loliondo in northern Tanzania for the wonder drug promised by a local faith healer.

Ngorongoro  District Commissioner Elias Wawa Lali told the *Sunday Nation* that the six died on March 8. Five of them died on the queue while the fifth, a child, was crushed by a vehicle he was under when the parents went for the liquid concoction.

*The Citizen* team that returned from Samunge village early this week counted five bodies.

However, a section of the Tanzanian media has reported bigger death figures, 10 of which are reported to have occurred last weekend alone.

People who died are mostly those taken straight from their hospital beds while in critical condition and taken to Loliondo for the miracle cure. They include those suffering from HIV/Aids-related ailments.

Deaths have also been attributed to exhaustion with the sick sometimes having to spend days queuing, travelling to the remote areas on nearly impassable roads or getting stranded on the way. Clean water, food, medicine are not readily available.

Traffic accidents have claimed at least eight lives and scores injured, some critically, in the area according to police reports.

Accommodation has been a problem but in recent days clever people have taken big tents to the area which they rent at high fees. Other people spend nights in their vans or outside in the cold.

The pilgrims normally start their journey from Arusha between 9 p.m. and midnight, arriving at Samunge in the morning, spend the whole day in the queue and after reaching the healer take another night before returning.

On Saturday, the Tanzanian government did not announce measures to stem the humanitarian crisis likely to develop in Loliondo after the miracle healer apparently stopped the exercise.

The Rev Ambilikile Mwasapile, whose clinic has attracted thousands seeking his herbal concoction, is reported to have called senior government officials in Arusha and urged them to hold on until he made public his stand on the issue.

Hordes of journalists based here converged at the district commissioner’s office early on Saturday to hear the government verdict on the crisis but were told steps to be taken would be announced after further consultations with the healer.

“Unfortunately there will be no briefing on what measures the government intends to take as we promised you yesterday (Friday),” said Mr Lali.

He noted the exercise had to be called off following communication received late on Friday in which the healer pleaded his  position on the matter should precede the government’s announcement.

“He [the healer] insisted that before the government announces any measures, he be given a chance to issue his statement on how best he thought the crisis should be handled,” the DC explained, declining further details.

Mr Lali later left with scores of journalists to the remote Samunge village.

He said contacts made with the healer indicated he preferred to make his stand known through a media briefing that the old man himself was expected to convene in his village on Saturday.

The spiritual healer’s decision would immediately be communicated to other government leaders, including the Minister of  State in the Prime Minister’s Office William Lukuvi who until Saturday was still in Arusha to monitor the crisis.

The minister has been in Arusha since Wednesday consulting leaders from the northern regions over the looming humanitarian catastrophe in Loliondo following the influx of people there for herbal treatment.

On Wednesday, he chaired a crisis meeting of leaders from six regions and admitted the authorities were cautious on handling the issue because the treatment offered there was mainly faith-based.

Mr Lukuvi reiterated earlier government position not to close the healer’s clinic but expressed his concern about the plight of sick people ferried there for treatment, poor sanitation and security.