

Dear Fellow South African,

The world is in the throes of a public health emergency on a scale not witnessed in over a century.

The spread of the coronavirus, which causes the disease known as COVID-19, has been alarmingly swift and widescale, and is now defined as a global pandemic.

It knows no geographical or territorial boundaries, has infected both young and old, and is on the rise in developed and developing countries alike.

As screening and testing is scaled up, the number of infections in South Africa is expected to rise.

Yesterday, I declared a national state of disaster, a measure proportionate to the severity of the threat to our people, to our society and to our economy.

This will enable us to have an integrated and coordinated disaster management mechanism and to set up emergency, rapid and effective response systems.

This virus will be extremely disruptive, and our priority is to safeguard the health and well-being of all South Africans.

We also have to address the inevitable economic fallout. We must expect a decline in exports, a drop in tourist arrivals and a severe impact on production, business viability and job creation and retention.

Cabinet is in the process of finalising a comprehensive package of interventions to mitigate the expected impact of COVID-19 on our economy. This is being done in consultation with business, labour and other relevant institutions.

It was Louis Pasteur who said that fortune favours the prepared mind.

South Africa is prepared, and has been so for some time.

Since the outbreak was first reported we have acted to put screening and containment measures in place.

Our national response has been driven by an Inter-Ministerial Committee (IMC) chaired and ably led by the Minister of Health, Dr Zweli Mkhize.

The manner in which the IMC and the support teams have responded to this emergency has been both exemplary and reassuring, particularly in helping to quell public panic.

I will be chairing a National Command Council to coordinate all aspects of our national response.

South Africa has a positive track record in managing public health emergencies. We have the knowledge, the means and the expertise. Our scientists and epidemiologists are world-class.

As was announced yesterday, we have put a raft of emergency measures in place, and will make funding available to support their implementation.

They include travel bans on visitors from high-risk countries; mandatory testing, self-isolation or quarantine for South African nationals returning from these countries; and strengthening surveillance, screening and testing at ports of entry into the Republic.

Social distancing is critical if we are to contain the spread of COVID-19.

Gatherings of more than 100 people are prohibited and mass celebrations of national days are cancelled. Visits to all correctional centres are being suspended for 30 days with immediate effect. Non-essential international travel for government officials has been proscribed and non-essential domestic travel discouraged.

A total of 35 land ports and two sea ports will be closed, as will schools from the 18th of March until after the Easter weekend. We will soon be announcing measures with regards to universities and colleges.

Next month will be Easter, a sacred period for a number of faiths and a time in which mass services and gatherings will take place. The faith community should take decisions in this regard in the best interests of the health of their congregants and the country as a whole.

Hygiene control should be intensified in all sectors.

Every citizen should take charge of their own safety by observing measures such as frequent hand-washing with soap or hand-sanitizers and covering their nose or mouth with a tissue or flexed elbow when coughing or sneezing.

As part of our national effort the Department of Health will continue with an intensive and ongoing campaign to raise awareness about prevention, transmission and infection symptoms. I encourage all South Africans to acquaint themselves with the relevant preventative material.

These measures are similar to those in other countries, and it is important we all understand that they are not punitive but a matter of public safety.

One of the greatest dangers at this time is ignorance and misinformation.

We should stop spreading fake and unverified news, especially on social media. This can exacerbate an already tense national mood and damage the national effort.

We must also not give in to the expressions of bigotry that we have seen in other countries directed at nationals of countries from where the outbreak began or the current epicenter in Europe. This is clearly a virus that affects people of all nationalities.

Let us lower the wing of compassion to those who are infected, and to those who have returned home from high-risk countries.

Let us assist those in need and those more vulnerable, instead of shunning them. We will remain faithful to the values of tolerance and respect that define us as a people.

On behalf of all the people of South Africa I thank the team who repatriated our compatriots from Wuhan, China, as well as the leadership and people of Limpopo who are assisting with the quarantine process.

This is a difficult time.

And yet it is in times of adversity that our strength is revealed.

We will act decisively, with determination and with purpose. We will act as a collective, for it is upon the actions of every South African that the success of our efforts depend.

The Thuma Mina moment is upon us, perhaps as never before.

This too shall pass.

We shall overcome.

We are South Africans.

With best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Cyril Ramaphosa". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.