

# Message by President Cyril Ramaphosa on COVID-19 pandemic

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30 March 2020 - 12:00am



My Fellow South Africans,

Good evening,

It is now four days since our country went into a nation-wide lockdown for the first time in the history of our democracy.

This is an extreme measure we had to embark upon in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

As government, we are aware that the lockdown has caused great disruption to all our lives and caused upheaval in our economy.

But we all know and agree that this nation-wide lockdown is absolutely necessary to save the lives of thousands, even tens of thousands, of our people.

Many countries on our continent and in our own region SADC have embarked on similar measures.

The disease is spreading rapidly in many countries around the world with some 740,000 people infected worldwide.

Over 35,000 people have lost their lives.

The health systems of many countries, including hospitals and clinics, are under tremendous stress as they deal with the pandemic.

Our own researchers and scientists have told us that our decision to lock down the country was a correct one.

They were concerned that without quick action we were only a few weeks away from a similar situation to other countries which have been adversely affected.

That is why we took the radical step of locking down the country for 21 days.

South Africans have, for the most part, responded responsibly to this decision, by staying at home, observing the regulations and exercising the greatest of care.

I would like to thank the people of South Africa for acting in a disciplined manner

through this very difficult period.

We are, however, concerned about those who have not yet appreciated the seriousness of this disease.

As a nation, we were deeply saddened to learn that, in the last few days, three South Africans have died from the disease.

We convey our sympathies and condolences to their families and friends and to their communities.

The number of infections continues to grow and there are now 1,326 confirmed coronavirus cases in South Africa.

I am therefore once again calling on each and every South African to stay at home for the next 17 days.

Leave your home only if you need to get food and essential provisions, collect a social grant, buy medicine or get urgent medical care.

The only people who can go to work are health workers, security and emergency personnel, those who work to keep our people supplied with food, medicine and basic goods and other providers of essential services as defined in the regulations.

If you do have to go out, make sure you do everything you can not to get infected and not to infect anyone else.

Some people may think this disease is something that doesn't concern them and will never affect them.

That it is something they only read about in newspapers or see reports about on TV.

But it is very real, and it poses a great danger to every one of us and to our society.

It infects the rich and the poor, the young and the old, black and white, those who live in the cities and those in the villages.

Let us not make the mistake of thinking this is somebody else's problem.

Every time you violate the regulations the government has issued or try to get around the rules, you are putting yourself and others at risk, and helping the virus to spread.

The next 17 days will be difficult for everyone.

Parents are worried about the safety of their children.

Small business owners and informal traders are losing much or all of their income.

Workers are worried about their jobs.

The elderly and the frail need people to care for them.

Some of those who live on the streets are without shelter or food.

Students are missing their lessons in class and are worried about the future.

All of us are experiencing great hardship and great anxiety at this time.

We have experienced a number of challenges that have imposed enormous burdens on our people.

That is why we are taking various actions to support businesses in distress, assist workers whose jobs are threatened and provide funding to small businesses.

We are providing shelter to people who are homeless.

We are continuing to deliver water to areas that do not have water so that our people can maintain high levels of hygiene.

We are particularly concerned about the impact of the lockdown on the self-employed and on informal businesses.

We are urgently developing additional measures to provide relief to them during this difficult time.

We know that there are many South Africans who are currently abroad and want to come home.

We are paying attention to this and will be giving assistance where possible within our constrained resources.

My fellow South Africans,

We are now entering a new phase in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the coming days, government will be rolling out a screening, testing, tracing and medical management programme on a huge scale.

Around 10,000 field workers will be visiting homes in villages, towns and cities to screen residents for COVID-19 symptoms.

People with symptoms will be referred to local clinics or mobile clinics for testing.

People who are infected with coronavirus, but who have no or moderate symptoms will remain in isolation at home or at a facility provided by government and those with severe symptoms will be transferred to hospitals.

Using mobile technology, an extensive tracing system will be rapidly deployed to trace those who have been in contact with confirmed coronavirus cases and to monitor the geographical location of new cases in real time.

This drive is far-reaching, it is intensive and it is unprecedented in scale.

This grave health emergency is happening at a time when our economy is under great strain.

As the country went into lockdown, we received the news that the rating agency Moody's had downgraded South Africa to a sub-investment grade.

This will significantly increase the cost of borrowing to fund government spending and will have a negative impact on the economy.

This development will not diminish in any way our response to the coronavirus pandemic.

We are pushing ahead to implement the necessary health interventions and economic and social measures to contain the spread of the disease and alleviate its effects on our people.

Within the constraints of the current crisis, we remain committed to implementing structural economic reforms to address weak economic growth, constrained public finances and struggling state-owned enterprises.

We are working together with our social partners to identify further measures we can take to limit the damage on our economy, and to ensure that as we emerge from this pandemic we set our economy on a clear path of growth.

Even as our country faces deep and pressing challenges on several fronts, there is no doubt in my mind that we will prevail.

That is because South Africans have come together like never before to wage this struggle against this virus.

Many businesses and individuals are making financial and other contributions to this cause.

In addition to the financial pledges announced last week we welcome the commitment by the Motsepe Foundation of R1 billion and by Naspers of R1.5 billion to the coronavirus response.

We are also extremely grateful to Mr Jack Ma, the founder of the China-based company Alibaba, who has donated vital medical supplies to South Africa and other countries across Africa.

We would like to thank our nurses, doctors and other health workers, social workers and frontline government staff, volunteers and NGOs who are leading the fight against the disease.

We thank the 18,000 security personnel, drawn from the police, defence force, metro police and other entities, that are responsible for ensuring our safety.

We have made it clear that the task of our security personnel is to support, reassure and comfort our people, and to ensure peace and order is maintained.

They know that they must act within the law at all times and that they must not cause harm to any of our people.

And then there is each of you, the 58 million South African citizens and residents who are standing together as one in confronting this national health emergency.

Among us are the men and women who rise at dawn every day, and labour through the night to keep this country going.

I speak of the farmworker who is helping to keep us supplied with food.

I speak of the technician in the power station working shift after shift to keep the lights on.

I speak of the caregiver in the old-age home, the childcare home and the hospice, who comes in every day to tend to the most vulnerable of our citizens.

To the taxi driver, the refuse collector, the supermarket cashier, the hospital cleaner, the petrol attendant and all those essential services workers, you are our unsung heroes, and we salute you.

In the midst of this uncertainty, there is a story that brings us hope and encouragement.

Yesterday, I went to meet the 114 South Africans who were evacuated from Wuhan in China and are going back to their homes after two weeks in quarantine in Polokwane.

They are a group of wonderful South Africans who are diverse in age, race, gender and place of origin.

For months, they have been in lockdown, first in Wuhan for some 51 days and then in Polokwane for 14 days.

Now they have to spend a further 17 days of lockdown at home.

We should all be happy that they have tested negative for the virus and are in good health.

They are in high spirits and are deeply thankful for what the country has done for them by bringing them home safe.

Some are students, some are teachers, some were working in China.

We thank the SAA crew, the medical team, the police and soldiers and the wonderful staff and management of the Ranch Hotel for having made this operation a great success.

The experience of these South Africans who returned from Wuhan gives us courage as we face the challenges ahead.

This is uncharted territory for us all.

We have never experienced a situation like this before and a number of mistakes will be made, but we ask for our people's understanding that all this is being done for the good of everyone.

We will continue to correct the mistakes where ever they are made

But I am convinced that we will succeed, because we will take this coronavirus threat seriously, we will adapt as a society, and we will all act responsibly.

If we work together, if we keep to the path we know we have to take, we will beat this disease.

I have no doubt that we shall overcome.

I wish you a good night.

May God bless South Africa and protect her people.

Cyril Ramaphosa