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Monday, 06 April 2020

Dear Fellow South African,

One thing we have learnt about the coronavirus over the last three months is that it does not respect borders. It has spread across Asia, Europe, North, Central and South America and Africa.

Distinctions of wealth, poverty, nationality, race and class have been rendered meaningless as infections grow in developed and developing countries alike.

The coronavirus pandemic has served as a stark reminder that in our interconnected world, no country and no nation exists for and of itself. It has affirmed once again that realising a continent and a world free of hunger, want and disease requires the collective effort of all.

South Africa is not the only African country battling to contain the spread of the worst global public health emergency in a century. To date there have been over 7,800 confirmed cases in nearly 50 African countries.

A number of African countries have embarked on similar measures to those we have adopted here, such as border closures, nationwide lockdowns and the roll-out of mass screening and testing programmes.

Now, African countries are working together. Africa is speaking with one voice and acting in unison.

Last Friday, I convened a teleconference of the African Union Bureau, which consists of the leaders of Egypt, Mali, Kenya and the Democratic Republic of Congo, as well as the Chairperson of the AU Commission Moussa Faki Mahamat. Other participants in the call included the leaders

of Rwanda, Ethiopia, Senegal and Zimbabwe. We received presentations from WHO Director-General Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus and the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Director Dr John Nkengasong, who provided an update on the state of the pandemic in Africa and across the world.

What they told us was extremely concerning. It confirmed the need to act swiftly and to undertake extraordinary measures.

There is a common appreciation that this virus, if not contained, could present a very real and serious setback to all our countries as we strive to eradicate poverty, inequality and underdevelopment in already constrained circumstances.

We agreed to establish regional coronavirus task forces in each of Africa's five regions: Southern Africa, East Africa, West Africa, Central Africa and Northern Africa. They will oversee screening, detection and diagnosis; infection prevention and control; clinical management of infected persons; and communication and community engagement.

While Africa has weak health systems and millions of people live in conditions of poverty, several countries across Africa have wide-ranging and extensive experience in managing infectious disease outbreaks and epidemics. The task forces will put this experience to good effect as we confront the current health emergency.

However, Africa is facing a severe shortage of coronavirus test kits, medicines, face masks and other personal protection equipment. We are therefore working with the WHO, Africa CDC and various world leaders to mobilise international support for Africa, to enable the flow of vital supplies into the continent and to significantly increase local production in African countries.

We have established an African Union COVID-19 Response Fund, to which AU Bureau members have already committed \$12.5 million. Funding to the Africa CDC, which is driving the continental health response, will be increased, with an additional \$4.5 million already committed.

Africa cannot do this alone. During the virtual summit of G20 leaders late last month, I raised the need for financial and logistical support for Africa's response. Given the substantial toll this pandemic is already taking on African economies, the assistance that will be needed could run into billions of dollars.

A number of measures have been proposed by the AU Bureau, including a comprehensive stimulus package for Africa. This could include debt relief in the form of interest payment waivers and deferred payments. This would free up much-needed financial resources now that national budgets are being reprioritised to support the coronavirus response.

This is really a time when not just the G20 countries but other international partners and financial institutions need to practically demonstrate their commitment to supporting developing economies in Africa and around the world.

In the last week, I have had useful discussions with a number of world leaders including the UN Secretary-General, EU Commission President and the leaders of France, Russia and Cuba. As South Africa, we continue to receive practical support from countries like the United States, China, Cuba and Russia.

Even as these countries struggle to contain the pandemic themselves, they are willing to support South Africa's and Africa's response. In uniting behind this global health emergency, as African countries we have shown once again our ability to transcend political and other differences in pursuit of a common objective. We should seize this moment to deepen collaboration across other areas, such as development or trade.

This global pandemic has exposed the fragility of inward-looking and insular political, economic and social systems. It is leading some to call for 'a new moral economy' that has people and their welfare at its centre.

It has opened up space for critical action around social spending and equitable access to health care. It is challenging widely held preconceptions about the abilities of developing countries to respond to national emergencies.

In both their respective national responses and the continental effort, African countries can hold their own.

In collaboration with the WHO our pandemic preparedness plans have been solid. In areas where constraints exist, there has been demonstrated commitment to extend support and capacity to those countries in need.

Our Africa Centre for Disease Control and Prevention is world-class. As are our health professionals, scientists and epidemiologists. With the necessary international support, we can bolster health infrastructure and health systems on the continent. At the same time, African countries will help each other.

If we continue in this positive vein, Africa will truly demonstrate it is more than capable of resolving its challenges. Through deeper collaboration, we will turn the tide against this virus, region by region, country by country.

With best wishes,

Ayil Ramaphosa