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Monday, 04 May 2020

Dear Fellow South African,

The entire world is in the unrelenting grip of the coronavirus pandemic, whose spread has been rapid. A vaccine has yet to be found. Across the world, over 3.4 million people are known to be infected and more than 240,000 have died. These are indeed desperate times.

When the national state of disaster was declared six weeks ago, South Africa only had 61 confirmed coronavirus infections. Despite the relatively low number, expert opinion and international experience indicated that infections would rise exponentially. I said that urgent and drastic measures would need to be taken.

Those measures – which included a nation-wide lockdown and the closure of our borders – have proved to be effective in delaying the spread of the disease.

This has been possible because most South Africans have adhered to the lockdown provisions, practising social distancing and wearing face masks. I applaud you for this and for all the other sacrifices you have made.

At this stage in the progress of the pandemic, other countries had far more infections than we do. As of now – which is 46 days since we recorded our 100th coronavirus case – we have 6,783 confirmed cases. Italy, which has a similar size population to ours, had more than 140,000 cases and the United States had around 700,000 confirmed cases at the 46-day mark.

But this does not mean that the danger has passed. We have not nearly reached the peak of infections in South Africa. All the scientific models show that the infection rate will continue to rise at a much faster rate in the next few months.

However, the speed with which the virus spreads and the number of people who are ultimately infected will be determined by what we do now. That is why the easing of the lockdown needs to be gradual and cautious. It is for this reason that many regulations need to remain in place and why it is absolutely essential

that people observe them. I know how difficult this is and I understand the concern that many of our compatriots have about how these regulations are interfering and limiting their rights. But all this is necessary. Our overriding objective is the preservation of life.

Social distancing and proper hygiene are still our best and only defences in this struggle. This is what informs the regulations we have put in place for level 4 of our response. Our considerations are based on empirical evidence, scientific and economic data and international best practice.

In the 1995 judgment of the Constitutional Court that outlawed capital punishment, Justice Arthur Chaskalson wrote: "The rights to life and dignity are the most important of all human rights and the source of all other personal rights. By committing ourselves to a society founded on the recognition of human rights we are required to value these two rights above all others."

The regulations we have put in place are founded on that commitment to life and dignity, and which justify – in these extreme circumstances – temporary restrictions on other rights, like freedom of movement and association. In doing this, South Africa is not unlike many other countries.

An estimated one-fifth of the world's population is under quarantine or nationwide lockdown, with this number growing rapidly in response to rising infections. This includes countries with substantially larger populations than ours, like India with its 1.5 billion people.

Dozens of countries have imposed curfews such as the one that is now in place here. Limitations on movement are in place in a number of countries. In the UK and the French capital, Paris, public exercise is limited to certain hours and within a certain distance of one's home.

Containment and prevention measures similar to ours are in place in a number of countries. For example, alcohol sales during lockdown have been either restricted or banned in a number of territories and by local governments, including parts of Mexico, Hong Kong and Greenland, which last month imposed a ban on alcohol sales during lockdown to limit infection but also 'to curb violence against women and children.'

There has been much public comment on government's decision to extend the prohibition on the sale of tobacco products into level 4. A decision like this is bound to be controversial, but it is wrong to suggest that there are Ministers or a President doing and saying whatever they want on this matter.

On 23 April, I announced that cigarette sales would be permitted during level 4. This was based on the view of the National Coronavirus Command Council (NCCC), and which was contained in the draft framework that was published for consultation.

After careful consideration and discussion, the NCCC reconsidered its position on tobacco. As a result, the regulations ratified by Cabinet and announced by Minister Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma on 29 April extended the prohibition.

This was a collective decision and the public statements by both myself and the Minister were done on behalf of, and mandated by, the collective I lead.

Every regulation we have put in place has been carefully considered. Along the way there has been consultation with medical experts, various constituencies and different industries. We have been guided by international bodies and the experience of other countries.

The reality is that we are sailing in uncharted waters. There is still a great deal about the epidemiology of the virus that is unknown. It is better to err on the side of caution than to pay the devastating price of a lapse in judgment in future.

While there are differing views on some of the decisions we have taken – and in some instances these have polarised opinion – government is making every effort to act in a way that advances the rights to life and dignity of all our people.

Listening to our people and their concerns during this period has been one of the distinguishing features of how we as government have managed this pandemic. We continue to listen to the concerns of our people and are prepared to make adjustments that balance people's concerns about the challenges they face with the need to save lives.

At this difficult time, our collective energies must be focused on ensuring that health and life is preserved, that the delivery of food, water, health care, social security and social support is not disrupted.

Under these extraordinary circumstances, as government, as individuals and as society we will at times make mistakes. When these occur, we will correct them. But we must carry on, losing neither our nerve nor our resolve.

The situation in which we find ourselves demands courage and patience. It requires goodwill and trust between you, the citizen, and your government, and between each other.

Over the past five weeks, most South Africans have adhered to the lockdown regulations and, as a result, we have slowed the spread of the virus.

It is my plea that we continue in this way and that we remain united in confronting this grave threat to the life and dignity of our people.

With best wishes,

Ayil Ramaphosa