

Opening Remarks by President Cyril Ramaphosa at the meeting with Heads of State and Government of countries neighbouring South Africa on responses to the COVID-19 pandemic

8 May 2020 - 12:00am



Your Excellencies,

Allow me to express my deep gratitude to you all for making yourselves available to participate in this vital discussion.

We are all confronted with an unprecedented public health crisis that has far-reaching social and economic consequences for each of our countries.

While the numbers of infections in Africa at this time is lower than elsewhere in the world, we expect that the peak of infections in Africa is still to come.

We are concerned about the impact the virus will have on our societies, our economies and our public health systems.

We therefore thought it would be important to meet as neighbouring countries – at the level of heads of state and government – to share information on our respective responses and to look at how we can better coordinate our efforts.

This virus does not respect borders, nor distinctions of nationality.

Considering the social and economic linkages between our countries, when one of us is vulnerable, we are all vulnerable.

In our capacity as chair of the African Union, South Africa has been deeply involved in the various measures undertaken by the AU to contain the spread of the virus and to mitigate the economic fallout that will be caused by the virus.

We have hosted two virtual meetings of the Bureau of the Assembly of AU Heads of State and Government.

Among other things, the Bureau agreed on the establishment of the AU COVID-19 Response Fund, a drive to raise additional funds for the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention and intensive lobbying of the international community, including the international financial institutions, for a comprehensive, robust economic stimulus package for Africa.

To date, we have managed to raise \$25 million for the Response Fund and an additional \$36.5 million to the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention.

We have also appointed five African Union COVID-19 Special Envoys to follow up on pledges, mobilise further international support and campaign for international participation in the AU's COVID-19 economic intervention.

The five envoys are Dr Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala of Nigeria, Dr Donald Kaberuka of Rwanda, Mr Tidjane Thiam of Côte d'Ivoire, Mr Trevor Manuel of South Africa and Mr Benkhalfa Abderrahmane of Algeria.

We have addressed the virtual Summit of the G20 and a virtual joint meeting of the World Bank and IMF, where we called for, among other measures, the allocation of more Special Drawing Rights Allocations to Africa to provide much-needed liquidity to central banks, the corporate sector and SMEs.

We argued for a waiver of all interest payments on multilateral and bilateral debt. This would provide the necessary fiscal space for African governments to devote all available resources to response and recovery.

In general, the response from the international community has been positive with various partners making pledges, offering debt relief measures and providing concrete support in the form of medical supplies.

While the World Bank and the IMF have supported a debt standstill for 9 months, we believe that – given the extent of the anticipated damage – we will need a debt standstill for 2 years.

One of the biggest challenges the continent faces is access to personal protection equipment.

As the AU Bureau, we met with several of Africa's business leaders to seek their assistance in ramping up local production of these items and sourcing them from other parts of the world.

I have appointed Zimbabwean business person Strive Masiyiwa to assist with efforts to source personal protection equipment for the region and the continent.

I have also engaged with the leaders of various countries, such as Cuba, China, Russia, France, Canada and the United States to ask for support for the continent.

As the South African government, we have moved quickly to respond to the virus.

Our strategy has been to delay the rate of transmission of the virus.

This has given us time to strengthen our public health response and to prepare our health facilities for the inevitable increase in people needing hospitalisation.

We declared the coronavirus pandemic a national disaster on 15 March, which included restrictions on travel and gatherings.

On 27 March we implemented a nation-wide lockdown that restricted all South Africans – apart from essential services workers – to their homes.

As we closed our borders to passenger travel, we made every effort to ensure that the trade of essential goods across our borders continued unhindered.

Since last week Friday, we have begun the gradual easing of lockdown regulations, enabling some economic sectors to resume operations on a limited scale.

The lockdown has had a severe impact on our economy and has threatened the livelihoods of millions of our people.

We have therefore announced a R500 billion emergency relief package to address the impact on companies, workers and households.

It includes wage support for employees of distressed companies, a loan guarantee scheme for small businesses, a temporary increase in social grants to reach the poorest households, and a special COVID-19 grant to assist the unemployed. We have had to significantly increase the health budget to ensure that we have enough hospital beds, medical equipment, medicine and health personnel at the peak of infections.

I will ask our Minister of Health, Dr Zwelini Mkhize, and by our Minister of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs, Dr Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma to provide further detail on the current state of the disease in South Africa and how we are responding to it.

In conclusion, I would like to thank you again for making time for this meeting.

I am certain that, working together, we will be able to better protect the health, the well-being and the lives of our people.

We will be able not only to overcome this grave health emergency, but also place our countries on a path of recovery and reconstruction.

I thank you.