

## Statement by President Cyril Ramaphosa on South Africa's response to the coronavirus pandemic

---

13 May 2020 - 12:00am



My Fellow South Africans,

This week, our country reached a sad moment in the progression of the coronavirus pandemic, as we recorded our 219th death from the disease.

Every life lost is a tragedy.

These 219 people who passed away had families, they had dependents, friends and colleagues.

Their lives were cut short by a virus that has caused human and economic devastation across the world.

In recording and reporting on the daily figures of new infections, deaths and recoveries — we can too easily lose sight of the fact that we are dealing with human lives.

This coronavirus is taking a heavy toll not only on the health of our people, but also on our people's ability to earn a living, to feed themselves and their families, to learn and to develop, and to enjoy many of the basic freedoms that we daily take for granted.

This evening, let us keep in our thoughts and prayers all those who have been infected by the coronavirus, all those who have lost loved ones, and also those who have endured — and continue to endure — great hardship because of the pandemic.

It is nearly 7 weeks since we implemented a nation-wide lockdown.

During this time, South Africans have demonstrated great courage, resilience and responsibility.

I once again thank you for the sacrifices you have made thus far.

I would like to say, as I have said before, that despite its duration and its severity, the lockdown was absolutely necessary.

Without the lockdown the number of coronavirus infections would have soared uncontrollably, our health facilities would have been overwhelmed and many thousands more South Africans would have died.

From the very beginning, our response has been guided by advice from world-leading

experts from our own country and across the globe.

We have also benefited from the guidance from the World Health Organisation.

The experiences that other nations have been through have also given us invaluable insights.

There have been several projections about the possible path the disease would have taken without our swift and decisive action.

As more data has become available, these projections have been updated and refined.

The best current estimate is that, without the lockdown and the other measures we have taken, at least 80,000 South Africans could have been infected by now.

And the death toll could have been at least 8 times higher than it is.

As it stands, there are 219 people in South Africa who have succumbed to this disease.

By contrast, at a similar stage in the progression of the disease, the United States had recorded over 22,000 deaths and the United Kingdom over 19,000 deaths.

We should never forget that the purpose of the lockdown was to delay the spread of the virus and prevent a huge surge of infections.

So far, we have been successful in the manner we as South Africans have responded and dealt with this virus.

The percentage of cases identified out of all the tests conducted – what is known as the positivity rate – has remained low and stable.

The level of confirmed infections in South Africa is around 181 people per million of the population.

By contrast, countries like the United States, the United Kingdom, Spain, Italy and Singapore have between 2,400 and 4,600 coronavirus cases per million people.

It is significant that out of the 12,074 confirmed cases in South Africa, we have recorded 4,745 recoveries.

By delaying the spread of the disease, we have been able to strengthen the capacity of our health system and to put in place wide-ranging public health programmes to better manage the inevitable increase in infections.

We now have nearly 25,000 additional beds available for quarantine.

We have been able to source and produce substantial quantities of personal protective equipment for health workers, vital medical equipment and other supplies.

Using the valuable time which the lockdown gave us, we have managed to significantly expand our screening and testing programme.

In all, our field workers have now screened over 9 million people, and we have conducted nearly 370,000 coronavirus tests.

This is the largest and most extensive public health mobilisation in the history of our country.

It has been made possible by the hard work and dedication of thousands of community workers, nurses, doctors and other health workers.

They made enormous sacrifices to ensure the success of the lockdown.

By answering the call to stay at home and stay safe, you, the people of South Africa, have helped us to save many lives.

As we have strengthened our public health response, we have introduced several vital measures to support the companies, workers and households that have been severely affected by the lockdown.

We have introduced an economic and social relief package worth over R500 billion to help companies in distress, to save jobs and to provide some income to informal workers and poor households.

Since it was established, the special COVID-19 relief scheme of the Unemployment Insurance Fund has paid out over R11 billion to 2 million employees employed by over 160,000 companies in distress.

This will help to keep companies afloat and save millions of jobs.

The various funds that we established to provide support for small businesses, including the initiatives of the Department of Small Business Development, the Department of Tourism, the Industrial Development Corporation and the South African Future Trust, have provided direct assistance to over 27,000 enterprises.

As of today, the R200 billion COVID-19 Loan Guarantee Scheme, which is guaranteed by the government, has begun to process applications from small and medium-sized businesses.

At the beginning of this month, government paid out an additional R5 billion to social grant recipients to assist poor households at a time when other sources of income have been disrupted.

We have opened applications for the special COVID-19 grant of R350 a month for unemployed South Africans who receive no other form of assistance from government.

By the close of business today, some 3 million South Africans had already applied for this assistance.

These temporary measures will be in place for six months.

We will spare no effort to ensure our most vulnerable citizens are supported and protected during this difficult time.

The scale of the measures we have taken, including tax relief and interventions by the South African Reserve Bank, is historic.

The Solidarity Fund, which was set up to support the coronavirus response, has raised around R2.7 billion in commitments from over 175,000 individuals and more than 1,500 companies and foundations.

We are grateful to the many governments and organisations that continue to generously support our coronavirus response.

In addition to those that I have previously recognised, I wish to express our appreciation to the government and the people of the United States for the donation of 1,000 ventilators.

I also want to recognise the commitment of the ELMA Group of Foundations of R2 billion to mitigate the impact of coronavirus on vulnerable communities in Africa.

This includes an immediate contribution of R250 million to South Africa's Solidarity Fund.

We are determined that our response matches the proportions of the crisis and helps to ensure that the foundations of our economy are protected.

There have been very disturbing reports of increased levels of gender-based violence since the lockdown started.

The scourge of gender-based violence continues to stalk our country as the men of our country declared war on the women.

We have developed an emergency pathway for survivors to ensure that the victims of gender-based violence are assisted.

One of the interventions we have made is to ensure lockdown regulations be structured in a manner that a woman can leave her home to report abuse without the fear of a fine, intimidation or further violence.

Now, two months after we declared a national state of disaster, we are ready to shift to a new phase in our response to the coronavirus pandemic.

On the first of May, we moved to Alert Level 4 and began the phased easing of the national lockdown.

This was in line with our risk-adjusted strategy through which we sought to slow down the rate of infection and flatten the curve.

We are now preparing for a further easing of the lockdown and a gradual opening of the economy.

I will repeat what I have said before: if we lift the lockdown too abruptly and too quickly, we risk a rapid and unmanageable surge in infections.

We will therefore continue to proceed cautiously, informed by the best available evidence and guided by the advice of local and international experts.

Our goal is to steadily increase economic activity while putting measures in place to reduce the transmission of the virus and provide adequate care for those who become infected and need treatment.

When I last addressed you, I outlined the five level alert system that we have introduced to guide this process.

At the time, the country was at alert level 5, which has the most stringent restrictions on movement and economic activity.

Alert level 4 – which is the current level across the country – retains most of the lockdown regulations but permits the gradual opening up of certain parts of the economy.

Alert levels 3 to 1 allow a progressively greater relaxation of restrictions.

As I indicated then, some areas of the country may be designated at a particular alert level, while others may be designated at other levels.

This would be done according to the rate of infection in an area and the state of readiness and the capacity of its health facilities to cope with treating infected people.

For now, infections are mostly concentrated in a few metropolitan municipalities and districts in the country.

It is important that we maintain stringent restrictions in these areas and restrict travel out of these areas to parts of the country with lower rates of infection.

We will immediately begin a process of consultation with relevant stakeholders on a proposal that by the end of May, most of the country be placed on alert level 3, but that those parts of the country with the highest rates of infection remain on level 4.

We will make further announcements after the completion of the consultations

In the coming days, we will also be announcing certain changes to level 4 regulations to expand permitted business activities in the retail space and e-commerce and reduce restrictions on exercise.

Some have questioned whether our approach in dealing with the coronavirus has been at the expense of the livelihoods of our people.

Our strategic approach has been based on saving lives and preserving livelihoods.

Our key objective has always been to slow down the infection rate through a number of interventions in our coronavirus prevention toolbox.

Each of these prevention measures are crucial and non-negotiable. They are:

- Lockdown (to achieve extreme social distancing)
- Social distancing
- Adopting hand hygiene practices by washing hands regularly with water and soap or sanitiser
- Cough etiquette including coughing into your elbow or a tissue
- Wearing cloth masks whenever you are in public places
- Use of personal protection equipment by all health workers
- Frequent cleaning of the work environment and other public spaces
- Symptom screening
- Testing, isolation, quarantine and contact tracing

It is in the implementation of all these preventative measures that we will overcome this disease.

The success of our efforts to limit transmission of the virus depends on finding those who are infected as early as possible, tracing their contacts and isolating them so they cannot pass on the virus to others.

Our door-to-door screening campaign in vulnerable communities across the country resulted in over 100,000 people being referred for testing.

This gave us a good indication of the extent of the infection among the population, but we now need a screening and testing programme that is targeted to areas where people are more likely to be infected.

This will involve the identification of infection hotspots using a combination of technology, surveillance data and epidemiological mapping, enabling the rapid deployment of dedicated screening and testing teams to these areas.

Those found to be positive should either self-isolate or be isolated in suitable and independently inspected facilities.

Most importantly, this new phase will require each of us to change our own behaviour in profound ways.

There needs to be a fundamental shift in our thinking and our way of life.

We need to take personal responsibility for our own health and the health of others.

Let us remember that although the lockdown has slowed down the rate of transmission, the coronavirus is very much still present – and will be present among us for a long time to come.

We have been warned that infections will inevitably rise as the lockdown measures are eased, as has happened in many countries.

We also know that the coronavirus will continue to be a global health threat for some time to come, and that the fight against COVID-19 needs to become part of our daily lives.

Our success in overcoming the coronavirus will ultimately be determined by the changes we make in our behaviour.

As restrictions are eased, we will need to observe social distancing even more carefully, wear face masks whenever we leave home, wash hands regularly with soap and water or sanitiser, and avoid contact with other people.

I have been encouraged that so many people are wearing face masks in public since the start of Alert Level 4.

We will need to re-organise workplaces, schools, universities, colleges and other public places to limit transmission.

We will need to adapt to new ways of worshipping, socialising, exercising and meeting that minimise opportunities for the virus to spread.

It is our actions now that will determine whether the advantage we gained through the lockdown can be sustained.

It is our actions now – individually and together – that will determine whether the great sacrifices that people have made over these last two months will ultimately save the lives of thousands of South Africans and spare our country from the huge devastation that this pandemic can cause.

The transition to the next phase of the coronavirus response will in many ways be more difficult than the present one.

The risk of infection outbreaks will increase as more people return to work.

This calls for vigilance, responsibility and discipline from all of us.

My fellow South Africans,

Over the last 7 weeks, you have been asked to endure much and to sacrifice much.

On more than one occasion, I have stood before you and asked you to accept stringent restrictions on your daily lives, knowing that these will bring great hardship.

You have heeded these calls, firmly convinced that these measures are necessary for the health and the well-being – indeed the survival – of our young nation.

In return for everything that is being asked of you, there are a few fundamental things that you ask of us, your leaders.

And that is why we must acknowledge that as we have confronted this unprecedented challenge, there may have been times when we have fallen short of your expectations.

Some of the actions we have taken have been unclear, some have been contradictory and some have been poorly explained.

Implementation has sometimes been slow and enforcement has sometimes been inconsistent and too harsh.

This evening, I want to reaffirm my commitment and the commitment of the government I lead to take whatever action is necessary to safeguard the life, the dignity and the interests of the South African people.

The last time I addressed you, I said that we will soon be embarking on the third phase of our economic response to the coronavirus crisis by outlining a clear strategy for economic recovery.

Cabinet is seized with this issue and will be announced when the work has been completed.

We are determined and committed:

to ensure that all government decisions are taken in good faith, that they are reasonable and based on empirical evidence, and that they do not cause more harm than good;

to be transparent, to take the nation into confidence and to do so regularly;

to continue to be forthright on the state of the pandemic. You want to know when things are bad, and be told when they could get worse;

to continue to engage and consult with you;

to ensure that we continue to mobilise every resource at our disposal to support the most vulnerable, and to give the greatest support to those most in need; and,

to make sure that the funds that are dedicated to our coronavirus response are not wasted

and are not stolen.

Above all, I pledge once again to ensure that your rights are respected and upheld, especially by those who have been entrusted with this responsibility.

As your President, as this government, we are firmly committed to meeting the expectations you rightly have of us.

Where we have disappointed, we will continue to make amends.

Where we make mistakes, we will continue to correct them.

Our collective struggles over the past months have taught us much about ourselves and about each other.

We have also learnt a lot about this virus.

Although there may have been differences and disagreements, there has also been kindness, empathy and compassion.

There has been courage and solidarity.

A very different South Africa and world awaits us.

The greatest test will be our willingness to embrace change.

Let us rise to meet this challenge.

Let us stand as one family and one nation to build a new and stronger society.

The days before us will be difficult.

But we will draw strength from what we have achieved.

We should recall the words spoken by President Nelson Mandela 20 years ago when our country was being devastated by another pandemic.

He said:

“In the face of the grave threat posed by HIV/AIDS, we have to rise above our differences and combine our efforts to save our people.

“History will judge us harshly if we fail to do so now.”

As I end, let me offer the words of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, delivered at a difficult time in the life of his own country:

The state of this nation is good  
The heart of this nation is sound  
The spirit of this nation is strong  
The faith of this nation is eternal.

May God bless South Africa and protect her people.

I thank you.



