



*Monday, 25 May 2020*

Dear Fellow South African,

Today marks 57 years since the leaders of 32 independent African nations met in Addis Ababa to establish the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), the precursor to the African Union.

The preamble of the OAU charter is a rousing call to unity, cross-cultural understanding and solidarity. Like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the UN Charter and the South African Constitution, it affirms the inalienable right of all people to control their own destiny.

We mark Africa Day this year just over three months since the first case of coronavirus on the continent was confirmed. This pandemic has been a stark reminder that regardless of whether we are born into wealth or indigence, we are all mortal, and can succumb to disease.

As countries around the world battle to turn the tide against the pandemic, Africa has taken firm control of its destiny, by developing a clear strategy and raising financial resources from its member states.

The African response to the coronavirus pandemic has received widespread praise. Despite the multitude of resource challenges they face, African countries have come together in remarkable ways, united by a common purpose.

The countries of the Global South are more vulnerable to the impacts of COVID-19 because of low levels of development, insufficient resources and weak health systems.

Countries ranking low on human development indices, many of which are in Africa, are less capable to manage the fallout of a global health emergency of this kind on their own.

Yet at the same time, some of the very health challenges African countries have wrestled with for decades have given us a clear understanding of what needs to be done, and how to do it.

The unprecedented nature of the pandemic caught many countries both unaware and unprepared. Much of what we witnessed in the early days of the outbreak was governments in western countries struggling with containment because so much about the virus was unknown. It was not something the world has experienced for over a century.

African countries have been able to use their experience in managing outbreaks of malaria, cholera, HIV, TB and hemorrhagic viruses like Ebola and Lassa. Our understanding of communicable diseases and how to manage them has put us in good stead when it comes to coronavirus.

African governments have been swift and proactive in implementing measures to flatten the coronavirus curve.

By early May, 43 African countries had full border closures, 53 had closed institutions of learning, 54 had limited public gatherings, 26 had instituted the compulsory use of face masks, 32 had instituted night-time curfews and 18 had imposed nation-wide lockdowns.

The African Union developed a comprehensive Joint Continental Strategy to guide cooperation between member states and set up a COVID-19 Response Fund. A number of countries, including South Africa, have rolled out massive food relief and social assistance measures to support the vulnerable during this time.

Although there have been severe shortcomings and constraints, such as the shortage of personal protective equipment, testing kits and ventilators, there have also been stories of excellence and intercontinental collaboration.

One such example is the work of the African Centres for Disease Control (ACDC) and prevention, a world-class institution with capabilities for disease surveillance and intelligence and health emergency preparedness and response.

African countries have scaled up their respective capacities for screening, testing and isolating. In April, the AU and the ACDC launched the Partnership to Accelerate COVID-19 Testing to strengthen testing capacity in vulnerable countries, with the aim of testing 10 million people over the next six months. Through this partnership warehousing and distribution hubs are being set up across the continent to distribute medical supplies. The aim is to pool the procurement of diagnostics and other medical commodities.

The deployment of community health workers to do screening, testing, contact tracing and case management is happening in many African countries, and draws heavily on our experience with HIV and TB.

African nations have also joined the race to produce test kits, with Senegal in an advanced stage of developing a low-cost testing kit.

At least 25 African countries have registered clinical trials for possible COVID-19 treatments, including for the BCG vaccine, hydroxychloroquine, antiretrovirals and Remdesivir, and as part of the global Solidarity clinical trials.

Whether it is in repurposing health protocols used with other infectious disease outbreaks, rapidly deploying health care workers to communities, or in launching mobile COVID-19 testing labs to improve national testing capacities, Africa is working proactively to overcome this global threat.

Though it is clear we will continue to rely on the support of the international community and international financial institutions to bolster the existing continental effort and build economic resilience, African countries are holding their own.

This Africa Day we are reminded once again that the solutions to Africa's problems, be they overcoming disease or eradicating poverty and underdevelopment, reside within Africa itself.

Although the coronavirus pandemic is not an African problem alone, we have shown ourselves capable of agility and ingenuity. The work being done to defeat the coronavirus is evidence of a continent determined to leverage its strengths and capabilities to resolve its own challenges. This is the premise on which the Organisation of African Unity was founded and it continues to guide and inspire us as we strive to build a better life for all of Africa's people.

Wherever you may be at this time, I wish you a happy Africa Day.

With best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Cyril Ramaphosa". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.