

Statement by President Cyril Ramaphosa on progress in the national effort to contain the COVID-19 pandemic, 15 August 2020

My fellow South Africans,

It has been five months since we declared a national state of disaster to combat the coronavirus pandemic.

As I said then, and as I repeat now, never before in the history of our democracy has our country been confronted with such a severe threat – a situation that has demanded an extraordinary response and much sacrifice.

It has been an immensely difficult five months, and the pandemic has taken a heavy toll – on the health of our people, on families and communities, on the public health system, on the economy and on people's everyday lives.

During this difficult period what all of us have longed for as South Africans most of all is to be healthy, restore our livelihoods and rebuild our economy.

I address you this evening amid signs of hope.

We are making progress in our fight against COVID-19.

Over the last three weeks, the number of new confirmed cases has dropped from a peak of over 12,000 a day to an average over the past week of around 5,000 a day.

The recovery rate from coronavirus has risen from 48% at the time of my last address and now stands at 80%.

The cumulative number of cases in our country remains extremely high at 583,653.

However, the number of active cases is declining every day, and now stands at around 105,000.

The virus appears to have peaked in several provinces, including the Western Cape, Eastern Cape, Gauteng and possibly in KwaZulu-Natal.

Fewer people are presenting with symptoms at our health facilities.

We are also finding that fewer people are requiring admission in our hospitals and the demand for coronavirus tests has dropped.

The number of patients hospitalised has decreased from 10,000 at the beginning of the month to around 4,000.

This is significantly reducing the pressure on our health facilities.

As of today, 11,667 people are confirmed to have died from COVID-19 in South Africa.

We mourn each and every one who has passed away and the many more that we may not yet know about.

The deaths of so many people in such a short space of time due to a virus such as this is a human tragedy of proportions that we would not have expected to befall our nation at a time of peace and democracy.

It is now clear that had we not acted as swiftly and decisively as we did – and had we not taken the threat as seriously as we did – far more lives would have been lost.

It remains our foremost concern in the weeks and months that lie ahead to continue to save lives.

When I announced the nation-wide lockdown on the 23th of March it was to prevent a sudden and uncontrolled surge of infections and to prepare our health system adequately.

As we look back at the past five months, all indications are that South Africa has reached the peak and moved beyond the inflection point of the curve.

Most of our health facilities have proven resilient, capable and able to withstand and deal with the surge.

The modelled projections of infections, hospitalisation and deaths have had to be adjusted downwards as we have recorded better progress in the management of the disease.

The progress we are recording in our management of COVID-19 would not be possible without the dedication and professionalism of our doctors, nurses and other health personnel, who have had to confront this unprecedented disease often under extremely difficult conditions.

We pay tribute to them, many of whom have been infected and some who have lost their lives taking care of others.

None of this would have been possible without all the other frontline workers, police women and men, soldiers, traffic officials and volunteers who have been at the forefront of our national response.

We also pay tribute to our medical experts in various health institutions, such as the National Health Laboratory Service, National Institute for Communicable Diseases, Medical Research Council and the Ministerial Advisory Committee who continue to play an invaluable role in our management of COVID-19.

Ultimately, the progress we have made would not have been possible without the sacrifices made by you, the people of South Africa.

It is you who have readily adapted to the restrictions around mask wearing, social distancing and good hygiene and in the process helped to save lives.

But while there are indeed signs of hope, we cannot and must not let our guard down.

As we continue to ease restrictions, the risk of infection does not diminish.

In fact, the risk of infection becomes greater as more people return to work, as they move about more and as there are more opportunities to interact.

We therefore cannot become complacent or abandon the health precautions that we know we need to take.

Even the slightest lapse in our alertness at this moment could lead to a resurgence in infections at a rate and on a scale far greater than what we have seen so far.

We have seen this happen in other countries, where stringent restrictions have had to be reimposed at short notice as the rate of infection rises after relaxation.

We have concluded that the lower rate of infections we are experiencing should lead to the relaxation of the restrictions we have had thus far.

However, now is the time for even greater vigilance and even greater care.

We must all continue to wear a cloth mask that covers our nose and mouth every time we leave home.

We must protect the elderly and those with underlying conditions from exposure to the virus.

We must continue to practice social distancing and ensure proper ventilation indoors.

We must continue to limit our travel to only that which is absolutely necessary, to avoid social gatherings and to remember to regularly wash or sanitise our hands.

We now know that a large proportion of people who are infected with the virus do not show symptoms and may not even know that they are infected.

I could be infected. As could you.

With this in mind, each one of us should consider ourselves as potentially infected with the virus and continue to behave responsibly so that we do not pass it on to others.

I know that the last five months have been extraordinarily difficult for our nation and for each one of us.

For everyone, this disease has meant the disruption of daily life.

But for millions of people, it has also meant hardship and hunger.

It has caused pain, anxiety and despair that no person should have to endure.

It has required a careful balance between saving lives and protecting livelihoods, between a devastating epidemic and a deep recession.

It has required difficult choices with far-reaching consequences.

While the measures we have taken have resulted in great hardship, we know that the alternative – of an uncontrolled surge of infections and a health system unable to cope – would have been even more devastating.

Now, amid the signs of hope, we are ready to enter a new phase in our response to the pandemic.

Due to the actions that we have taken, collectively and individually, over the last few months, we have reduced the rate of transmission.

We have relieved much of the pressure on our health system.

Guided by the advice of our health experts and after consultation with provincial and local government, Cabinet has decided to place the entire country on alert level 2, with effect from midnight on Monday, the 17th of August 2020.

Alert Level 2 in terms of our risk adjusted strategy in dealing with the pandemic means that there is a moderate COVID-19 spread of the virus with a relatively high health system readiness.

The move to level 2 means that we can remove nearly all of the restrictions on the resumption of economic activity across most industries.

Economic activity will be allowed with the necessary and appropriate stringent health protocols and safety precautions in place.

Therefore, the following changes will take effect under level 2:

All restrictions on inter-provincial travel will be lifted.

Accommodation, hospitality venues and tours will be permitted according to approved protocols to ensure social distancing.

Restaurants, bars and taverns will be permitted to operate according to approved protocols as to times of operation and numbers of people.

Restrictions on the sale of tobacco will be lifted.

The suspension of the sale of alcohol will be lifted subject to certain restrictions.

Alcohol will be permitted for on-site consumption in licensed establishments only up until 10pm.

Liquor outlets will be allowed to sell alcohol for off-site consumption from Monday to Thursday during the hours of 9am to 5pm only.

Restrictions on family and social visits will also be lifted, although everyone is urged to exercise extreme caution and undertake such visits only if necessary.

Infections have been known to take place during family visits, endangering family members and sometimes leading to the deaths of some family members.

Social distancing should be observed, masks should be continue to be worn and special care should be taken to protect the elderly and people with underlying conditions.

Familiarity with each other should not allow us to forget these precautions.

As we ease restrictions, it is necessary that some measures remain in place to limit transmission and protect our health capacity.

Therefore,

Current restrictions on international travel will remain in place.

No gatherings of more than 50 people will be permitted. Among others, this includes funerals and religious events.

Spectators will not be permitted at sporting events.

The curfew will remain in place between the hours of 10pm and 4am.

We continue to encourage people to stay at home if they can and, if possible, to work from home, especially if they are over the age of 60 or have underlying conditions.

In order to keep the remaining restrictions in place and to maintain some of the essential elements of our health response, it is necessary that we extend the national state of disaster once again until 15 September 2020.

With this new phase of our response, we need to put in place the practices and forms of behaviour that we must continue to adopt for some time to come.

This virus will remain with us for many months and I must applaud the many South Africans who have changed their way of life to meet that reality.

I must also make mention, in particular, of the contribution of traditional leaders and religious leaders of all faiths who have provided guidance on how religious and cultural observances can be adjusted during the time of coronavirus.

We welcome the role of community structures across the country that are promoting awareness around the disease and mobilising people to take action to prevent the spread of the virus.

These include sporting organisations, political parties, trade unions, stokvels, burial societies, women's groups, small business formations, civic organisations and youth bodies.

It is through this work that our response to the coronavirus will have its greatest effect.

Alongside basic precautions that all of us can take, we are improving public health capacity so that we can better identify, isolate, test and treat every positive case and trace and quarantine every contact.

In the coming days, we will announce a powerful new tool to support our digital contact tracing efforts.

In addition to manual contact tracing and the national WhatsApp channel, a mobile application will be used to notify contacts more quickly while preserving their privacy and anonymity.

The Minister of Health, acting on behalf of our government, requested the Director-General of the World Health Organisation, Dr Tedros Ghebreyesus, to send experts to South Africa to bolster our efforts against the coronavirus.

We deeply welcome the support from the WHO, which has brought 43 experts to South Africa to assist our hard working health professionals to help us fight this epidemic.

They are already providing help with regard to epidemiological analysis, infection control, incident management and community engagement.

We must continue to minimise the risk of outbreaks in high-vulnerability settings, particularly in homes for older people, mental health facilities and other institutions.

We will also strengthen our efforts to enforce health and safety measures in the workplace, in retail stores and public transport, to protect workers and commuters and create a safe environment for businesses to operate.

While this crisis has brought us together as a nation, united against a common threat, it has also brought out some of the worst tendencies in our society.

We have witnessed the actions of some individuals who have sought to profit through corrupt means from this pandemic.

We have taken decisive action to stop this and bring those responsible to book, and we will regularly update the country on the progress we are making.

We continue to grapple with the pandemic of violence against women.

We are proceeding with the work to strengthen the response of the criminal justice system, provide better support to survivors of gender-based violence and, most importantly, intensify all prevention measures.

Following the measures we have put in place as part of the R500 billion social and economic relief package, we continue to engage with our social partners in business and labour on how to sustain and improve the support being provided to companies, employees and households.

The further easing of restrictions presents us with the greatest opportunity since the start of the pandemic to breathe life into our struggling economy.

Even as we open up economic activity, it will take a long time for industries and businesses to recover, and there is much work still to be done.

On Thursday, I convened all the social partners in NEDLAC, namely government, labour, business and community.

We are now working together on an urgent economic recovery programme that places the protection and creation of employment at its centre.

We will be making announcements on the outcome of this work in the next few weeks.

We will use this moment not only to return South Africa to where it was before, but to transform our country to a more equal, more just and more dynamic economy.

Fellow Citizens,

Difficult days indeed lie ahead.

However, we have proven our resilience as a nation over the past five months.

The task before us now is to apply the same energies with which we have battled this pandemic to the economic recovery effort.

We are weathering a long and difficult storm.

We are enduring great hardship and suffering unbearable losses.

But we continue to stand firm against this onslaught.

We have taken action to protect ourselves, our communities and our country.

A ray of light is visible on the horizon.

Let us continue to exercise the greatest caution and care, and remain ever-vigilant.

Let us continue to stand united in our determination to defeat this virus.

Let us press forward – one nation, resolute, hopeful and courageous.

Morena boloka setjhaba sa heso, Setjhaba sa South Afrika.

May God Bless South Africa and protect her people.

I thank you.

**Issued by the Presidency of the Republic of South Africa
Pretoria**

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