



*Monday, 17 August 2020*

Dear Fellow South African,

At midnight tonight, our country will move to alert level 2 in our response to the coronavirus pandemic. This will come as a relief to all South Africans who have had to live under stringent restrictions for the last five months.

It is a sign of the progress we are making in reducing new infections and demand on our health facilities. It is also a very important development as we strive to restart our economy.

But it is too soon to celebrate.

We are still very much in the middle of a deadly pandemic that has taken over 11,000 lives in South Africa alone. At more than half a million confirmed cases, we still have the fifth highest number of infections in the world. And there is always a chance of a resurgence of the disease.

If we ever need a stark reminder of the need for vigilance, we should look to recent events thousands of kilometres away in New Zealand. Three months since the country was declared coronavirus-free, New Zealand is once again under lockdown. Although the latest outbreak was of relatively few cases, the government swiftly re-imposed lockdown restrictions.

Similar restrictions have had to be reimposed in several parts of Europe as they experience a ‘second wave’ of infections. These experiences show just how swiftly things can change when it comes to COVID-19.

It is a wake-up call to any among us who may harbour illusions that we are even close to seeing the end of this grave public health emergency.

Certainly, there are signs of hope. The number of new confirmed cases in South Africa continues to decline. At the peak of the disease just one month ago, we were recording around 12,000 new cases a day. This has dropped to an average of around 5,000 a day over the past week. Our recovery rate stands at 80%.

As the country moves to alert level 2, many restrictions on social and economic activity have been lifted. With this comes increased risk of transmission.

We now need to manage this risk and ensure the gains we have made thus far in containing the pandemic's spread are not reversed. The greatest threat to the health of nation right now is complacency. It may be that we are now permitted to meet friends and family, to visit entertainment venues, to travel for leisure and to consume alcohol in restaurants, bars and taverns.

But as the old adage goes, just because you can, doesn't mean you should.

Many people who have the coronavirus do not have symptoms and may not even know they are infected. This is a sobering reality because it means that any of us could be infected right now and could unwittingly infect others.

This is particular the case when visiting relatives, especially the elderly and those with pre-existing medical conditions that render them vulnerable to infection. It is also true for attending religious services or cultural activities.

The 'second wave' of infections that several other countries have experienced is an ever-present possibility for us too. Although many restrictions have been lifted, it does not mean they will not return should we experience a significant rise in infections. This pandemic is a matter of life and death. We need to adapt and we need to be vigilant.

In the days, weeks and months that lie ahead, we must urgently focus our efforts on recovery. Our economy and our society has suffered a great deal. As we return to economic activity across almost all industries – and work to repair the damage done – we have a responsibility to not let our guard down as individuals, employers, communities, families, professionals, workers and citizens.

None of us wants a return to the early days of extreme lockdown restrictions. We want to move on with our lives. We want our friends and loved ones to remain healthy and safe.

As a nation, let us continue to work together to ensure that we progress. The move to alert level 2 of the lockdown is not a 'free for all.' The rules on social distancing, mask wearing, social gatherings and international travel remain.

Our success rests on our ability to abide by these regulations and to ensure that we each behave carefully and responsibly.

Every time we are considering any form of non-essential activity, we should ask: what is the risk of infection to ourselves and to others? Where there is a risk, even a slight one, it is better not to do it.

Let us proceed, as ever, with caution. Let us keep each other safe.

With best wishes,

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