

Remarks by the President of the Republic of South Africa and African Union Chair, H.E. Cyril Ramaphosa, during the 73rd Session of the World Health Assembly, 18 May 2020

President of the 73rd World Health Assembly, Her Excellency Ms Keza Bain, Director-General of the World Health Organization, Dr Tedros Ghebreyesus,

Your Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my privilege to address the World Health Assembly.

We are in the midst of the most serious public health emergency our world has experienced in over a hundred years.

Containing the coronavirus pandemic has dwarfed all other issues facing the international community and individual countries.

The pandemic has profound social, political, economic and security implications for us all. It is impacting on human health, our societies and our systems of governance.

Although the coronavirus pandemic has affected both developed and developing economies, it is the poor who will suffer most.

The pandemic has highlighted the dangerous and growing inequality that exists both between countries and within them.

Health care systems are struggling to cope.

Some have been weakened by underfunding and neglect; others are under pressure because they were designed to serve the select few.

The pandemic has devastated the livelihoods of millions of people.

This virus will continue to be with us for some time, and we will have to change the way we behave, work and live.

The global recovery depends on our ability to accept these realities, to prepare for them and to adapt accordingly.

The social distancing, hygiene and other protocols recommended by the World Health Organization must become part of our everyday lives.

South Africa affirms its full support for the World Health Organization, which has been key in guiding the international response to the pandemic.

The WHO has been instrumental in providing guidance and support to African governments with early detection of the pandemic, training health workers and strengthening surveillance in communities.

Africa is extremely vulnerable to the ravages of this virus and needs every possible support and assistance, including much-needed resources, to bolster its response and offset a potentially devastating social and economic fallout.

The African Union has taken very deliberate steps to respond to the scourge.

We have developed a comprehensive COVID-19 strategy, established an African Union COVID-19 Response Fund and embarked on a fundraising drive to strengthen the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention.

To date, we have raised a combined amount of US\$ 61 million for the Response Fund and the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention.

The African Union has made a call for developing countries to be assisted in their efforts to combat the pandemic and to rebuild their economies.

This assistance needs to include debt relief, more Special Drawing Rights Allocations with the international financial institutions, and the provision of comprehensive and robust stimulus packages to vulnerable countries.

To turn back the frontiers of the pandemic, we also need to deepen international collaboration around research and development and investment in essential medical technologies, in COVID-19 diagnostics and therapeutics and in vaccines.

We fully support the initiative by the WHO together with many governments, non-profit organisations and industry leaders to speed up the development and production of vaccines and therapeutics, and to ensure that they are distributed quickly and equitably across the globe.

For its part, South Africa is participating in several research initiatives with continental and international partners including the global effort to develop, manufacture and distribute a COVID-19 vaccine.

We must ensure that there is equitable access to medical equipment, technologies and best practice to combat COVID-19.

In this final decade towards the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals, we must press ahead with our goal of making universal health care a reality for all the people of the world.

The coronavirus pandemic has demonstrated the essential value of universal health coverage and should propel countries to act with greater urgency to make it a reality.

Let us also continue to work together to improve our emergency preparedness for potential future outbreaks of this nature, and take forward the proposal made at the previous meeting of the World Health Assembly to develop a Global Disaster Response Plan.

Let us continue to be bold and courageous in confronting this pandemic.

Let us continue to collaborate and to act in the best traditions of social solidarity.

I thank you.

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