



**Statement by Dr Naledi Pandor, MP, Minister of International Relations and Cooperation, on the occasion of the Media Briefing on International Developments for the year 2020, 14 December 2020**

**1. Introduction**

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a dramatic impact on all of our lives during this past year. It has affected the way we live, the way we work and the way we interact with each other.

It has made us aware that no person or nation can thrive in isolation.

Despite the separation and interruptions to international contact created by the pandemic we have been able to continue international work.

This approach of working with others resonates with South Africa's foreign policy, which is driven by a vision to achieve a just and equitable world and an African Continent that is peaceful, democratic, non-racial, non-sexist and united and prosperous.

As far back as 1955, the Congress of the People adopted the Freedom Charter, envisioning a South Africa free from the oppression of Apartheid, wherein all the people who live and work in it enjoy human rights and fundamental freedoms. The Freedom Charter also envisaged a South Africa that works with all nations of the world to build global peace, friendship and substantive justice and equality for all people. These values and ideals underpin democratic South Africa's foreign policy.

During this year, we have worked along with all nations of the world to address the effects of the pandemic and find solutions to our common challenges, which include conflict, underdevelopment, climate change and humanitarian disasters.

We have, therefore, played our role in leadership positions in global and continental governance institutions and strengthened our bilateral relations as we continued to pursue a foreign policy, grounded by the fundamental values in our Constitution which promote a safe, peaceful, just, fair and prosperous South Africa, region, Africa and world.

**2. Responding to the Impact of COVID-19**

In April this year, the United Nations Secretary General, Mr António Guterres, stated that the COVID-19 pandemic would be a humanitarian crisis that would see people 'suffering, sick and

scared'. He called for increased levels of cooperation and solidarity from all nations of the world. At a special session of the United Nations General Assembly on COVID-19 on 03 December, President Ramaphosa stated that the acts of international solidarity since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic was indeed phenomenal and proved that no country could operate from a position of isolation. President Ramaphosa's statement, eight months after the UNSG made the call for global cooperation to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 indicated that most countries and indeed the institutions of global governance have been responsive.

As Chair of the African Union, South Africa initiated a coordinated Africa response that focused on addressing the immediate challenges to the public health systems in Africa and measures to mitigate the economic and humanitarian crisis. This included establishing a COVID-19 Response Fund and launching an African Medical Supplies Platform to ensure all countries have access to the necessary equipment and supplies.

The African Union has also developed a vaccine strategy for the continent, and established a COVID-19 African Vaccine Acquisition Task Team (AVATT), in support of the Africa Vaccine Strategy tasked to ensure that COVID-19 vaccines are available for Africans.

Building on the call made by the UNSG in April, the African Union has also called for a comprehensive economic stimulus package for Africa and the suspension of interest payments on Africa's external and public debt.

Despite the progress made in cooperation and with many countries experiencing a second wave of the pandemic, global attention is shifting to access to vaccines and their approval for use. There are fears that the richer countries of the globe may hoard vaccine stocks and use intellectual property rights to block access to vaccines by developing countries. 'Vaccine Nationalism' is a very real threat as it will create supply problems to poorer countries thereby denying their citizens access to life saving vaccines. The African Union Commission and the CDC are giving close attention to this and seeking ways of ensuring all countries have access.

Defeating this virus still requires countries to collaborate with each other and to work with multilateral institutions to ensure that all people access the required health and medical interventions and that they benefit from economic and social measures required for a sustained response to the pandemic. We also continue Africa's focus on the post COVID-19 economic recovery.

### **3. Our Diplomatic Footprint in the Region and the Globe**

South Africa's interests in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the rest of the continent are driven by the values and ideals that I outlined earlier. We require and want an African Continent that is peaceful, democratic, non-racial, non-sexist, united, and prosperous.

Much work still needs to be done to achieve this vision. Too many of our people live in situations where there is instability, violence and conflict. This includes the situations in Libya, the Sahel,

Cabo Delgado in Mozambique; South Sudan and the east of the DRC. We are also concerned by the recent developments relating to the situation in Western Sahara, which US recognition of Morocco goes against international law and the African Union's Constitutive Act. These developments may fuel hostilities between Morocco and the Sahrawi. Silencing the guns in these situations requires dealing with the root causes of conflicts, which invariably includes governance deficits, human rights abuses and contestation over resources. The recent AU Summit agreed that the role of foreign interests in the conflicts needs greater attention.

That being said, and despite the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic the continent still presents massive economic opportunities for international and South African investors particularly in the sectors of mining, agriculture and agro-processing, telecommunication, infrastructure, hospitality and tourism. Maximising these opportunities is important as building the regional economy is a key contributor to peace and stability.

The Asia region has managed to limit the economic harm that has affected most other regions as a result of measures to contain the COVID-19 pandemic and is projected to have the strongest regional rebound projected at 8% growth in 2021 according to the IMF. This is good for continuing the robust trade and investment that South Africa enjoys with countries in the region. An indicator of this is that the total two-way trade with Asia and the Middle East (inclusive of Oceania) breached the important milestone of R1 trillion (R 1009 726 847 172), for the first time, in 2019 (SARS 2019).

With South Africa having recently acceded to the Treaty of Amity with ASEAN, we anticipate increased opportunities for further collaboration with the key Indo-Pacific regional actors, this provides a strategic platform for enhanced trade and economic initiatives with a wider range of Asian partners.

As is the case with the Western Sahara discussed earlier, there are recent developments that are undermining the internationally agreed parameters to end the occupation of Palestine based on two viable states. This includes the dilution of the Arab Peace Initiative agreed to by the Arab League in 2002, that linked normalisation of relations with Israel with its withdrawal from the occupied territories. South Africa will continue to foreground the importance of multilateral led initiatives to end the occupation so that people on both sides of the 1967 green line enjoy freedom, peace, dignity and justice.

South Africa has also continued to enjoy strong and mutually beneficial relations with countries in Europe, South America and North America.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, we have strong cultural, social and economic ties with all countries. We are concerned though that Cuba and Venezuela remain severely affected by unilateral sanctions outside of the legalities provided for sanctions by the UN Charter.

The United States also remains a strategic trade and investment partner with partnerships in key areas such as health, education, transport, environment, science and technology and

energy. Exports of goods and services and income from US investments in South Africa amounts to US\$ 412 billion per annum.

South Africa also enjoys cordial relations with Canada. Canada's development assistance is targeted towards South Africa's domestic priorities, such as health, education, governance and capacity building. South Africa and Canada are both strong supporters of multilateralism and collaborate at the level of the UN and other multilateral fora on issues such as climate change, human rights, shared and inclusive growth, gender empowerment and peace and security.

South Africa enjoys mature and excellent relations with the Nordic countries, which is based on mutual respect, human rights, dialogue, consultation and co-operation, with a strong emphasis on supporting South Africa's drive to greater autonomy. All the Nordic countries are active on the African Agenda and have prioritised African issues in their foreign policy. This includes expanding diplomatic relations, trade and investment, development support, peace-making and conflict resolution, youth development, the promotion of woman, cooperation on climate change issues and the promotion of a more just and equitable international system.

South Africa intends to further exploit opportunities in innovative sectors such as energy, climate change, digitalisation, agriculture, water management and oceans management.

We also look forward to strengthening bilateral and economic ties with Turkey as we prepare to host the inaugural South Africa – Turkey Bi-National Commission.

We have very good cooperation with Russia as our strategic partner bilaterally and within formations such as BRICS and the UN amongst other multilateral fora. The country is South Africa's 4th largest trading partner in BRICS.

However, although bilateral trade has increased significantly, from R2.9 billion in 2010 to R13.1 billion in 2019, it remains below potential and we are working very hard to boost our economic relations to a higher level. We do this through our Structured Mechanism, i.e. the Intergovernmental Committee on Trade and Economic Co-operation (ITEC), which I Co-chair.

Other countries in the Central and Eastern Europe Region demonstrate great potential for expansion in trade and economic relations with South Africa and we intend to explore these further in 2021.

The countries of Western Europe remain critical for South Africa's economic development. These countries include some of our major foreign investors, largest trading partners and sources of tourism. Some 2,000 European companies represented in South Africa are also a major source of employment and skills development.

Countries in the region have been supportive of South Africa and Africa's efforts to combat COVID and provided test kits and other forms of assistance. We are pleased to have been part of the Oxford-AstraZeneca COVID vaccine research programme.

The European Union (EU), is the largest economic bloc in the world, accounting for 25% of global GDP and about 20% of global trade and is South Africa's largest and leading trading

partner as a bloc. Total trade has increased from R150 billion in 2000 to R693 billion in 2019. Despite that, there remains a declining trade deficit, and an ongoing negative trade balance, exports to the EU have increased steadily over the years, growing from R64 billion in 2000 to R319 billion in 2019.

#### **4. South Africa's role in institutions of global governance**

The world today is changing at a fast rate. Changes affect international relations and how countries relate to each other and position themselves on the global stage. It is an integral part of our work as diplomats to monitor the shifting global dynamics and challenges.

Aside from the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the rise of trade wars, increasing protectionism, nationalism and populism and an inward-looking focus on countries' domestic priorities have challenged collective efforts for change through multilateral institutions. While this may change with the anticipated re-engagement with the multilateral system by the US in 2021, South Africa will continue to work to strengthen and indeed reform the institutions of global governance.

Our two year services as a non-elected member of the United Nations Security Council concludes at the end of December, a month in which we are chairing the Council. Many observers, including member states and think tanks have suggested that South Africa's third term was particularly successful. We demonstrated through our votes and engagements with other council members that our stance is independent of global political blocs and that our values and characteristics shaped by our struggle against colonialism and apartheid, which now underpin our constitutional principles, determine how we engage on issues pertaining to peace, security, development and human rights. The fact that we were consistent on matters in the UNSC and across the UN system, strengthened our role as bridge builder and justified a more permanent role for South Africa and other African countries at the UNSC.

Our terms as Chair of the African Union coincided with our role at the UNSC. We used this opportunity to champion African issues at the UN and foster closer collaboration on matters relating to peace and security between the UNSC and the AU. South Africa also prioritised the implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), which eliminates trade barriers and is expected to enhance competitiveness and stimulate investment, innovation, and economic growth on the Continent – Agreement to begin implementing the AFCFTA in 2021 is a very positive development.

South Africa will continue to utilise its membership of fora such as BRICS, IBSA (Indian, Brazil, South Africa) and IORA (India Ocean RIM Association) to advance reform of the global, political and economic architecture and create deliverables through the emerging role of the New Development Bank (NDB), cooperation in health and innovation, trade, tourism and investment, as well as efforts to reform the UNSC.

South Africa needs international support and, in particular, investments and debt relief, to deliver the President's vision of accelerated industrialisation, women's empowerment and youth

employment. We must focus 2021 on economic reconstruction and recovery implementation alongside a focus on the pandemic.

## **5. Conclusion**

One of the challenges we faced as the DIRCO in 2020 was the Repatriation of our Nationals, who found themselves stranded outside of South Africa due to lockdowns that were implemented by many countries, including South Africa, in their attempt to curb the spread of the virus.

From the time the President announced South Africa's Level 5 lockdown on the 15 March 2020 to the time when international travel was again allowed under level 1, my Department, through our Consular Services managed to repatriate just over 30 000 South Africans who were stranded from all corners of the world, using over 350 flights.

The number excludes tens of thousands who used our land borders.

Allow me to take this opportunity to once more express my gratitude to all the officials who were involved in this process. I know many spent sleepless nights, working seven days a week trying to bring our fellow citizens back to their loved ones.

This experience has made us realise the importance of making sure that we equip all South Africans who intend travelling abroad during this season with information that might help them not to find themselves needing to be repatriated because they are stranded.

### **Pointers:**

1. Countries in the Northern hemisphere are encountering a second wave of the pandemic. South Africans should be cautious in travelling to these countries as you might become distressed or even destitute abroad pending the levels of lockdown in the respective countries and with the likelihood of international flights that might be cancelled at short notice. Please note that you will be travelling at your own risk to these countries knowing the current circumstances and the uncertainty going forward. Please ensure that you are familiar with the immigration and health entry requirements of the country you will visit and South Africa's entry health requirement during the pandemic. If you have any uncertainty regarding the entry health requirements of the country you will be visiting, then please contact their Embassy in SA for assistance. If you need any clarity re the health entry requirements upon your return to SA, then please consult the website of the Department of Health.

2. Please ensure you have adequate travel insurance. Many South Africans had no or inadequate travel insurance during the peak of the pandemic earlier this year to cover extended hotel accommodation, new flight tickets, etc.

3. Please register with our Embassies abroad. The contact particulars of all our Embassies are available on DIRCO's website (<http://www.dirco.gov.za/>). South Africans are encouraged to register via the e-mail addresses provided as some of our officials might be working remotely

due to local lockdown regulations and will not always be able to take your calls. Inform your Family or Next of Kin of your destination and duration of stay.

4. Ensure that you meet the Immigration requirements of the country you wish to visit as Countries have revised their visa regimes during the global pandemic.

5. Read thoroughly on the country you intend visiting as the global situation is unstable. If the country you visit is a high risk, consider postponing your visit or proceeding with caution if the travel is avoidable.

6. Know the COVID-19 protocols of the country you intend visiting and should you not comply, you might be refused entry. Although not yet common, many Airlines will likely require proof of COVID-19 vaccinations before commencing travel. Currently, a COVID-19 test is compulsory.

Travel well, be safe and exercise extra care and caution this Festive season.

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