



STATEMENT BY PRESIDENT CYRIL RAMAPHOSA ON PROGRESS IN THE NATIONAL EFFORT TO CONTAIN THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

15 JUNE 2021

Fellow South Africans,

It is exactly 15 months since we declared a National State of Disaster in response to the coronavirus pandemic.

We have never experienced a health crisis of this severity before, nor one so prolonged.

It is understandable that many South Africans now feel tired and weary.

We mourn the many lives that we have lost, and we are struggling to cope with the huge impact that the pandemic has had on the livelihoods of millions of people.

I know that we have grown impatient with the constraints that have been placed on our lives.

I fully understand that you are concerned about constraints that restrict your freedom to travel, to gather, to socialise, to worship and, in some instances, even to earn a living.

Yet we also know that these restrictions have been effective in containing the spread of the virus.

We have gone through and endured two devastating waves of infection.

But working together we have brought down infections and prevented the loss of many lives.

We know that as difficult as the last 15 months have been, we have started to recover and rebuild.

Although it has encountered several setbacks, our mass vaccination programme is gaining momentum and we are finally on the path to controlling the disease.

But although we have reason to hope, we still have a mountain to climb.

A third wave of infections is upon us. We have to contain this new wave of infections.

Since I last spoke to you just over two weeks ago, the average number of daily new infections has doubled.

Then, we were recording around 3,700 daily infections.

Over the last seven days, we have recorded an average of 7,500 daily infections.

Hospital admissions due to COVID-19 over the last 14 days are 59 per cent higher than the preceding 14 days.

The average number of people who die from COVID-19 each day has increased by 48 per cent from 535 two weeks ago to 791 in the past seven days.

With the exception of Northern Cape, all provinces are experiencing rising infections.

Four provinces – Gauteng, Free State, North West and Northern Cape – are officially in a third wave, while others are approaching that point.

The proportion of COVID tests that are positive – the so-called positivity rate – is continuing to rise in Gauteng, Limpopo, Western Cape, Free State and KwaZulu-Natal.

Of these, Gauteng has been the worst hit.

It accounts for nearly two-thirds of new cases measured over the last week.

The increase in infections in Gauteng is now faster and steeper than it was at the same time in previous waves.

Within a matter of days, it is likely that the number of new cases in Gauteng will surpass the peak of the second wave.

Private hospitals in the province have reported that they are near capacity.

We have to act decisively and quickly to save lives.

And to do this, we need to return to the basics.

We need to remind ourselves how the virus is spread so that each one of us makes sure that we behave in a way that reduces the chances of transmission.

We must not disregard the basic precautions that we know are so essential. Our scientists inform us that it is through our behaviour that the virus is spread.

We must remember that many people who are infected with COVID-19 do not show any symptoms.

The person who may be sitting next to you in a taxi, who may be a co-worker, or a friend or even a family member at a social gathering may be infected.

You could get infected as you are travelling in a taxi that does not have any windows open.

You could catch the virus from your co-worker who does not wear their face mask in a way that covers their nose and mouth.

Your friend or family member may not have washed or sanitised their hands before passing you a drink or a plate of food, and you could get infected.

You may go to visit your elderly parents or grandparents, not knowing that you are infected and infect them.

You could visit your relative who has diabetes, hypertension or another underlying condition and infect them, even though you feel healthy.

You could go to church or the mosque, or you could go to a crowded restaurant or shopping centre and all the time be passing on the virus and putting the health and lives of others at risk.

It is, unfortunately, as easy as that to spread the disease.

When we know that we have been exposed to a person infected with COVID-19, we must follow the protocol to quarantine for ten days no matter how inconvenient it may be for us.

This is one of the best ways to stop the virus from spreading further.

Basic changes in behaviour can make a huge difference.

We have spoken about this many times, but it does bear repeating because oftentimes there are lapses in our behaviour.

We must be more diligent, more consistent and more aware of our actions.

If we are careful and diligent we can limit transmission and bring down the rate of infection.

The fewer people that are infected at any one time, the fewer people get sick, fewer people need to be hospitalised, fewer people need ICU care, and fewer people need ventilators.

What we know from the last two waves of infections, and from experience around the world, is that when health facilities are overwhelmed more lives are lost.

Our priority now is to make sure there are enough hospital beds, enough health workers, enough ventilators and enough oxygen to give the best possible care to every person who needs it.

The massive surge in new infections means that we must once again tighten restrictions on the movement of persons and gatherings.

We need to enforce compliance more rigorously and we need to take firmer action against those who do not adhere to the regulations.

In view of the rising infections, we have therefore decided to move the country to Alert Level 3.

This will take effect later this evening once the regulations have been gazetted.

This means that:

- The hours of curfew will start at 10pm and end at 4am.
- Non-essential establishments like restaurants, bars and fitness centres will need to close by 9pm to allow their employees and patrons to travel home before the start of the curfew.

- All gatherings will be limited to a maximum of 50 people indoors and 100 people outdoors.

Where the venue is too small to accommodate these numbers with appropriate social distancing, then no more than 50 per cent of the capacity of the venue may be used.

This includes religious services, political events and social gatherings, as well as restaurants, bars, taverns and similar places.

- Attendance at funerals and cremations may not exceed 50 people and all social distancing and health protocols must be observed.

Night vigils, after-funeral gatherings and 'after-tears' gatherings are not allowed.

- The sale of alcohol from retail outlets for off-site consumption will only be permitted between 10am and 6pm from Monday to Thursday.

This excludes public holidays.

Alcohol sales for on-site consumption will be permitted as per licence conditions up to 9pm.

Alcohol consumption in all public spaces, such as beaches and parks, is strictly forbidden.

Throughout our response to the pandemic, we have sought to take measures that are appropriate and proportionate to the threat of infection.

If we act too soon, or impose measures that are too severe, the economy will suffer.

At the same time, if we act too late, or if our response is too weak, we risk losing control of the virus.

We have therefore closely monitored the data and heeded the advice of our experts and scientists.

The measures we are putting in place now are appropriate to the level of risk and necessary to save lives.

In addition, several important measures remain in place.

It remains mandatory for every person to wear a face mask that always covers their nose and mouth at all times when in public spaces.

It is a criminal offence not to do so.

The owners and managers of public buildings, centres, shops, restaurants, taxis and buses all have a responsibility to ensure that people on their premises or in their vehicles wear masks.

They must ensure that the appropriate social distancing measures are in place and adhered to.

It is important to remember that it is a criminal offence if the number of people on these premises exceeds the maximum number of customers or employees allowed for there to be proper social distancing.

The move to Alert Level 3 will affect several aspects of our lives and may require changes to activities that we had planned.

This includes, for example, arrangements for the Youth Day commemoration, which was scheduled to be held in Pietermaritzburg tomorrow.

This will now be a hybrid event, with a significantly reduced number of people physically in attendance, and a virtual address by the President.

We each have a responsibility to take the necessary action to protect ourselves and others.

It is up to each one of us to limit the risk to ourselves and others.

We are all aware that our vaccination programme has experienced several delays.

Our first setback was that after the arrival of our first batch of vaccines, our scientists discovered that the AstraZeneca vaccine that we had procured from the Serum Institute of India did not provide sufficient protection against the variant that is predominant in South Africa.

We have also been adversely affected by shortages in the global supply of vaccines, which has hampered vaccination programmes across Africa and in many other low- and middle-income countries.

After the AstraZeneca setback, the Johnson & Johnson vaccine appeared to be the best option for our country as it protects against the variant, because it requires only a single dose and is easier to store and transport.

However, the supply of Johnson & Johnson vaccines was held up by an investigation into contamination of ingredients at a supplier factory in Baltimore in the United States.

Until now, our mass vaccination programme has therefore had to rely on the Pfizer vaccine, which requires two doses.

Nevertheless, 480,000 health workers have received the Johnson & Johnson vaccine to date as part of Phase One of the programme.

As part of Phase Two, a further 1.5 million health workers and people over the age of 60 have received the first dose of the Pfizer vaccine.

This brings the total number of people who have received a vaccine dose to almost 2 million.

The pace of vaccinations has steadily picked up, and we are now vaccinating around 80,000 people a day at over 570 sites in the public and private sector.

This number will grow rapidly in the weeks to come, as we aim to protect as many vulnerable people as possible.

The problems with the Johnson & Johnson vaccine have now been resolved.

As a result of these problems, 2 million doses that had already been produced are unusable.

The Aspen plant in Gqeberha in the Eastern Cape is now able to go ahead and produce new doses.

The company has committed to significantly ramp up production and begin supplying the country within the next few days.

We have to date received nearly 2.4 million Pfizer vaccine doses.

By the end of June, we expect to have received a total of 3.1 million Pfizer doses.

We have received an indication from Johnson & Johnson that it expects to deliver around 2 million vaccines to South Africa by the end of the month.

The initial doses we receive from Johnson & Johnson will be used to vaccinate educators in our schools and thereafter security personnel on the frontline.

Now that the delays in the supply of vaccines is largely resolved, our immediate task is to complete the vaccination of all those over 60 years of age without delay.

It is estimated that we have the capacity at present to vaccinate at least 150,000 people a day, and we are planning to increase that to 250,000 a day as soon as possible.

I therefore call on every person in this country over the age of 60 to register – whether online, by SMS, by phone or in person – and get vaccinated without delay.

I call on everyone else, if you know someone over 60 years of age who has not been vaccinated, please help them to register and get vaccinated.

As we see the rate of infection rise across the country, there is one statistic that provides a clear reason for hope.

At a similar point in the rise of the second wave of infections in early December last year, there were 640 health care workers infected by COVID-19 over a seven day period.

In the last seven days, only 64 health care workers have been infected.

While it must be our unwavering determination to ensure that no health care workers are infected, this is a significant reduction in infections, which can be attributed to the success of the first phase of our vaccination programme.

This is evidence that vaccines work.

It must motivate us to accelerate the roll-out of vaccines and to ensure that all people who are eligible register and receive the vaccine.

Fifteen months ago, as I addressed the nation from the Union Buildings, I said:

“This epidemic will pass.

“But it is up to us to determine how long it will last, how damaging it will be, and how long it will take our economy and our country to recover.

“It is true that we are facing a grave emergency.

“But if we act together, if we act now, and if we act decisively, we will overcome it.”

After all the time that has passed, after everything we have experienced, after everything we have done and achieved as a nation, these words still ring true.

We have endured so much as a nation and we have prevailed.

We will not be overwhelmed by uncertainty, fear or despondency.

We will not be daunted by the size or the complexity of the task before us.

We can now see a path towards overcoming this pandemic.

But there is still much that we need to do.

We have shown that we have the means and the will to fight this virus.

And I am more confident than ever that we will succeed.

God bless South Africa and protect her people.

I thank you.

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