

President Cyril Ramaphosa: Progress in the national effort to contain the Coronavirus Covid-19 pandemic

11 Nov 2020

My fellow South Africans,

We have not had our national family meeting for some time.

It has been many months now since the outbreak of the coronavirus in South Africa.

The pandemic has caused great hardship for all our people.

After such a long time of uncertainty and worry, we all wish for a return to normal life.

I know that many of us are suffering from coronavirus fatigue.

The problem is that we have begun to forget that the virus is still present all around us.

As I speak to you this evening, the COVID-19 pandemic is worsening across the globe.

The world has just recorded its highest number of weekly new cases since the start of the pandemic and the highest number of weekly deaths.

More than 51 million people have been infected globally, and at least 1.2 million people have died.

Many countries are in the midst of a second wave of infections, which has often been more severe than the first.

What we are seeing brings home a difficult truth: that COVID-19 is far from over.

It is very much still here. And it will remain with us for some time to come.

As South Africa, we have endured what we hope is the worst of the storm.

At the height of the pandemic, in July, we were recording around 12,000 new infections a day.

For more than two months now, the number of new infections has remained relatively stable at below 2,000 a day.

The number of deaths has been declining steadily, as has the number of people requiring hospitalisation.

The total number of new hospital admissions has declined for the 14th consecutive week.

We owe this to the decisive measures that we took early in the pandemic, and to the contribution that every South African has made in fighting this virus.

We owe this also to the frontline workers who have selflessly and courageously staffed our medical facilities, gone out into communities to screen and to test, who have maintained peace and stability, and who have kept essential services working.

From the progress we have made, from the lessons we have learnt, we now know that under the current alert level 1 we have all the tools we need to prevent a resurgence.

For as long as we observe all the necessary health protocols and remaining restrictions – as individuals, as businesses, as institutions – there should be no need to return to a higher alert level.

We should be proud of our response as a nation, which has been widely recognised and commended by many across the world.

I had a virtual meeting yesterday with several international business leaders whose companies operate in many countries across the world. They all applauded the manner in which South Africa has managed the pandemic.

While this is welcome progress, we must acknowledge that this pandemic has so far taken a great toll on the health and well-being of our people.

To date, South Africa has recorded 742,394 coronavirus cases.

Of these people, over 92% have recovered.

But the greatest blow we have suffered since the start of this pandemic are the confirmed deaths of 20,011 people due to COVID-19.

While we have a relatively low fatality rate compared to many other countries, we cannot begin to calculate the loss and anguish that these deaths have caused.

Since the beginning of this crisis, our goal was both to save lives and protect livelihoods.

As we rebuild our country in the midst of this pandemic, this must remain our overriding concern.

Although infections have stabilised, many people are still getting infected every day and we remain vulnerable.

We are seeing how quickly and how dramatically infections can rise in a number of countries.

We are also seeing how health systems can become overwhelmed in the face of rising infections.

The rise in infections in some of these countries has led to the reimposition of tough restrictions.

We have also seen in other countries how a resurgence can dash hopes for a swift economic recovery.

We must do everything we can to prevent this from happening in our country.

If we are to prevent a resurgence of infections in our country, there are a few areas that we must pay attention to.

The first is the situation in the Eastern Cape, which is showing signs of a resurgence.

In the last week, the number of new cases in the province was 50% higher than the week before.

And the total number of new cases in the last 14 days was around 145% higher than the previous 14 days.

These increases are being driven by massive spikes in the Nelson Mandela Metro and the Sarah Baartman District in particular.

For the last month, there has been a sustained upward increase in hospital admissions in the province.

The evidence suggests that the increases in the Eastern Cape could have been triggered by outbreaks in institutions of higher learning such as universities, schools and attendance by people at large gatherings.

When this is combined with poor adherence to social distancing, mask wearing and other poor hygiene measures, the environment for rising infections is set.

With many people moving between the Eastern Cape and other provinces – particularly the Western Cape – it is a matter of time before this surge spreads to other parts of the country.

We therefore need to take measures to contain the rise in infections.

In response to the rising infections, we are implementing the resurgence plan that has been developed together with the surge team deployed to South Africa by the World Health Organisation.

Interventions include primary health care outreach teams to intensify contact tracing, daily community mobilisation, ensuring the readiness of health facilities, and being ready to respond to possible clusters outbreaks.

We will be working closely with the provincial government, municipalities and other institutions in the Eastern Cape in the coming days and weeks to ensure that this surge is contained and managed.

What we are witnessing in the Eastern Cape should be a wake-up call to all of us, that we cannot relax and we cannot be complacent.

We are therefore also closely monitoring developments in areas that are experiencing higher than average rates of new infections.

The areas where we are experiencing higher than average rates of new infections include Lejweleputswa and Mangaung in the Free State, Frances Baard and Pixley ka Seme in the Northern Cape, and the Garden Route and Cape Town metro in the Western Cape.

To ensure that we can keep all the necessary prevention measures in place, we are, as required by the Disaster Management Act, extending the National State of Disaster by another month to the 15th of December 2020.

The second area of concern that we need to pay attention to is the upcoming festive season, during which many South Africans travel to other parts of the country and where people tend to gather socially.

These activities, if not undertaken responsibly, pose the greatest immediate threat to our management of the pandemic.

But we can avoid a second wave if we each play our part, if we remember what we need to do to keep ourselves and others safe.

From the big cities and metros to the smallest towns and villages, we all know about this virus.

From the Grade R learner to the factory worker, from the university student to the grandparent at home, we all know how the coronavirus can be spread.

So what I am asking of each and every one of you this evening is not something new. I am asking you to do what you know must be done.

We know that this virus is transmitted when we are in close contact with other people.

Let us remember that it is transmitted in small particles from our nose and mouth when we talk, cough, sneeze or even breathe heavily.

We also all know what we need to do to protect ourselves and those around us.

A cloth mask, worn over the nose and mouth, is still one of our best defences.

I know this can sometimes be a hassle.

Masks can be hot and uncomfortable.

They make it difficult to recognise other people or to hear clearly what they're saying.

But cloth masks are cheap, they can now be found almost anywhere, and the inconvenience of wearing one is far, far better than becoming infected or infecting others.

Wearing a mask every time we leave home is far, far better than a second wave.

It is also far better than a return to lockdown and better than having to shut down the economy.

A number of outbreaks have been linked to indoor gatherings where there is poor ventilation and no social distancing.

Of course with the festive season approaching it is understandable that we will want to be with family and friends. It has been a stressful and traumatic year. We want to socialise and connect with each other.

But this doesn't mean we should let our guard down.

We must remember that every additional person we come into contact with increases the chances of transmission.

We should avoid large gatherings. We should rather meet in small groups.

If we must go out, we should limit contact with others.

I have been increasingly getting concerned and alarmed by what I have been seeing on social media and even on television where people are holding big parties, gatherings and social events as though the virus does not exist.

I have been seeing images of indoor venues crowded with people who are not wearing masks and with no evidence of social distancing.

These are super spreader events that must be avoided because this is dangerous behaviour.

The same rules that applied in the early days of the lockdown should apply now.

And now that we are in summer it is far easier to meet outdoors or in rooms with the windows open.

As we have said before we need to utilise various tools in our coronavirus toolbox to fight this virus.

We can also use technology to fight the virus.

I call on each of you to join the 700,000 South Africans who have downloaded the Covid Alert SA mobile app.

The Covid Alert app can notify you if you have been exposed to the virus – whether it is in a taxi, a shopping mall or a social gathering – and it does so without sharing your location or any personal information.

The app is zero-rated by mobile networks, so it won't cost you anything to protect yourself and others.

By downloading the app, you help to make the virus visible and break the chain of transmission.

We would like to appeal to all organisations to encourage their staff and visitors to download the app when they enter their offices, shops, schools, universities and other enclosed spaces.

In addition to these actions we should all take to prevent a resurgence, we are strengthening our public health interventions.

Testing is essential if we are to successfully prevent a resurgence.

Without the severe capacity constraints we had a few months ago, we are now working to significantly increase the number of tests done each day.

All hospitals, both public and private, should test hospitalised patients in line with the revised guidance.

We will also be expanding community screening and testing in hotspots areas.

An effective and safe vaccine is our greatest defence against COVID-19, and there are now several candidate vaccines in development across the world.

Equitable access to an effective vaccine is vital to the successful containment of this pandemic.

Earlier this week, the world witnessed a game-changer in the world of science regarding the development of a vaccine.

This is the first evidence that an effective vaccine against a coronavirus is possible.

And that the preliminary data from the research suggests that it may be more than 90% effective.

This changes our perspective of the future of the coronavirus pandemic.

This development brings new hope in our fight against this virus.

South Africa is collaborating with several multinational pharmaceutical companies to obtain a safe and effective vaccine for our people and is contributing towards the availability of the vaccine in the rest of the continent.

We are working through the African Centres for Disease Control and Prevention to acquire and fund a vaccine for the African continent.

It is estimated that Africa will need around \$12 billion and 750 million doses of an effective vaccine.

Earlier this week, in my capacity as a Chairperson of the African Union, I established the COVID-19 African Vaccine Acquisition Task Team to lead this effort.

Our Minister of Health will serve on this task team together with other outstanding citizens of our continent.

South Africa has also been appointed as a co-chair of the global ACT-A initiative that is facilitating access to innovative interventions – including vaccines – for all countries.

Countries are going to have to allocate funding so that there can be access to vaccines to prevent the further spread of the coronavirus.

In recognition of our country's manufacturing capability one of the leading pharmaceutical companies in the world, Johnson & Johnson, has entered into a preliminary agreement with a local company, Aspen Pharmacare, to manufacture and package its candidate vaccine.

Aspen has capacity to manufacture 300 million doses of the candidate vaccine at its Nelson Mandela Bay plant. This is life-saving medical product that will be needed across the world, which will be manufactured by South African workers.

This is in addition to the progress made by Biovac, a local biopharmaceutical company that is in partnership with the South African government.

Biovac is in advanced discussion with an international vaccine manufacturer that would also enable it to locally manufacture a COVID-19 vaccine to ensure sufficient supply for our country and the continent.

Fellow South Africans,

From the onset of this crisis, we have sought to both save lives and protect livelihoods.

That is why in April we introduced a massive economic and social relief package to limit the effects of the pandemic on companies, workers, households and communities.

This intervention was essential to keep businesses afloat, to protect jobs and to prevent millions of people from going hungry.

Now, as our economy has been steadily opening up and restrictions on movement and activity have been eased, we have been able to turn our attention from these emergency measures towards an ambitious plan of economic reconstruction.

Through the various interventions that we are making to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic, we are shifting from relief to recovery.

As the economy starts to recover, many of the measures in the relief package are steadily being wound down.

We are trying – within our limited resources – to ensure this is a gradual transition.

We recognise that some industries are still not able to operate fully and that it will take some time for many jobs to return.

That is why we extended the Special COVID-19 Grant for a further three months, until January 2021.

This will provide much needed income to around 6 million people who are unemployed and do not receive any other form of government grant.

Following extensive discussions with our social partners, the UIF will extend the COVID-19 UIF Ters benefit scheme by another month, to 15 October 2020.

Discussions continue with our social partners on support for businesses in distress going forward, mindful of the need to ensure that the UIF has sufficient funds to meet the anticipated rise in unemployment claims.

The COVID-19 UIF scheme has already paid out nearly R53 billion to over 4.7 million workers.

These relief measures were necessary to protect those who are most vulnerable in a time of great distress, but they will have to come to an end.

The relief package has laid the foundation for a robust economic recovery, limiting job losses and keeping afloat many businesses that would otherwise have been forced to close.

As we transition to a new phase in our response, the only way forward is a rapid and sustained economic recovery.

We are therefore working to enable all parts of the economy to return to full operation as quickly and as safely as possible.

We are amending the alert level 1 regulations to restore the normal trading hours for the sale of alcohol at retail outlets.

We are also opening up international travel to all countries subject to the necessary health protocols and the presentation of a negative COVID-19 certificate.

By using rapid tests and strict monitoring we intend to limit the spread of the infection through importation.

We expect that these measures will greatly assist businesses in the tourism and hospitality sectors.

We are focusing relentlessly on the implementation of our plan, pursuing a few priorities with the highest impact and ensuring that we deliver on these.

Our infrastructure programme continues to gather pace, with the strong support of the private sector and development institutions.

Many programmes supported through the Presidential Employment Stimulus have already started, and recruitment for others has begun.

Among these, the Department of Basic Education has opened recruitment this week for teacher and school assistants, targeting unemployed youth in every province.

Next week, we will be holding our third South Africa Investment Conference, which is an important indicator of the country's continued value as an investment destination for both local and foreign investors.

We will continue to drive progress on the reconstruction and recovery plan, including through the implementation of structural reforms to shift our economic trajectory.

Through our actions now we can ensure that we remain on the path to recovery.

My Fellow South Africans,

We have lost many lives to this pandemic.

Many of us have had to bid farewell to a loved one, a friend or a colleague.

As we look back on a year of much pain and sorrow, it is important as a nation that we should honour and remember all those who have succumbed to this disease.

It will be appropriate that during the 16 Days of Activism for No Violence against Women and Children – which is the second pandemic we are confronting – we demonstrate our remembrance of all those who have departed due to the COVID-19 pandemic and gender-based violence.

Cabinet has decided that from the 25th to 29th of November, the nation should embark on five days of mourning for the victims of COVID-19.

We will let the national flag fly at half-mast throughout the country from 6am to 6pm from Wednesday 25 November to Sunday 29 November.

We call upon all South Africans to wear a black armband or other signs of mourning to signify our respect for those who have departed.

We call upon all South Africans to demonstrate their solidarity and do this in remembrance of our countrymen and women, in recognition of the grief that we share as a nation, and as an affirmation of our determination to overcome this devastating disease.

My Fellow South Africans,

As I address you this evening, the country has just received the deeply sad news of the passing of the outgoing Auditor-General Mr Kimi Makwetu.

During his term as Auditor-General, Mr Makwetu served his country with dedication, with distinction and with integrity.

Our thoughts and prayers are with his family at this time of great sorrow.

As a nation, let us continue to do what we know must be done to keep ourselves and others safe.

Let us continue to demonstrate that we are a people of resilience and courage.

Let us show that we care for one another in sorrow, sickness and in death.

It is our individual actions over the next few weeks and months that will decide the fortunes of our nation.

The actions we must take are straightforward, but they are not insignificant.

They can and do save lives.

Let us continue to work together like the great South African family that we are to restore, to recover and to rebuild.

May God bless our beautiful country South Africa and protect her people.

I thank you.

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