



Statement by President Cyril Ramaphosa on progress in the national effort to contain the COVID-19 pandemic.

12 July 2020

My Fellow South Africans,

This evening, as I stand here before you, our nation is confronted by the gravest crisis in the history of our democracy.

For more than 120 days, we have succeeded in delaying the spread of a virus that is causing devastation across the globe.

We delayed the spread of the virus by working together and by maintaining our resolve. But now, the surge in infections that we had been advised by our medical experts would come, has arrived.

The storm is upon us.

More than a quarter of a million South Africans have been infected with coronavirus, and we know that many more infections have gone undetected.

As of this evening, there are 276,242 confirmed cases in the country. We are now recording over 12,000 new cases every day.

That is the equivalent of 500 new infections every hour.

Since the start of the outbreak in March, at least 4,079 people have died from COVID-19. What should concern us most is that a quarter of those who died passed away in the last week.

We mourn the loss of each and every one of them, including some who have been in leadership positions in our country, such as Queen Noloyiso Sandile of the AmaRharhabe and North West MEC Gordon Kegakilwe.

Our thoughts and prayers are with all their families at this time of extraordinary

grief.

We extend our best wishes for a speedy recovery to three of our premiers who have been tested positive for coronavirus – Premier Alan Winde, Premier David Makhura and Premier Job Mokgoro.

As a country, we are not alone in our fight against coronavirus.

Most other countries around the world are engaged in the same struggle as we are.

More than half a million people have died from COVID-19 across the world, and the total number of confirmed cases across the world has grown rapidly to more than 12.7 million.

While the surge in infections has been expected, the force and the speed with which it has progressed has, quite understandably, caused great concern.

Many of us are fearful of the danger this presents for ourselves, and for our families.

Like the massive cold fronts that sweep into our country from the South Atlantic at this time of year, there are few parts of the country that will remain untouched by the coronavirus.

The coronavirus storm is far fiercer and more destructive than any we have known before. It is stretching our resources and our resolve to their limits.

The surge of infections that our experts and scientists predicted over 3 months ago has now arrived. It started in the Western Cape and is now underway in the Eastern Cape and Gauteng.

Gauteng is fast approaching 100,000 confirmed cases.

The Eastern Cape has passed 50,000 cases, and although the rate of transmission has slowed in the Western Cape, it will soon have 80,000 cases.

According to current projections, each of our provinces will reach the peak of infections at different times between the end of July and late September.

Yet, while infections rise exponentially, it is important to note that our case fatality rate of 1.5% is among the lowest in the world.

This is compared to a global average case fatality rate of 4.4%.

We owe the relatively low number of deaths in our country to the experience and dedication of our health professionals and the urgent measures we have taken to build the capacity of our health system which faced a number of its own inherent challenges before COVID 19.

We must remember that the most important measure of success is the number of lives we save.

More than 134,000 South Africans have recovered from the coronavirus.

Many of those who have recovered took personal responsibility for their health and the health of others, by self-isolating or presenting to quarantine themselves facilities.

Even as most of our people have taken action to prevent the spread of the virus, there are others who have not.

There are some among us who ignore the regulations that have been passed to combat the disease. They also act without any responsibility to respect and protect each other.

In the midst of our national effort to fight against this virus there are a number of people who have taken to organising parties, who have drinking sprees, and some who walk around in crowded spaces without masks.

Then there are some of our people who see no problem attending funerals where the number of people in attendance exceed the number of 50 that has been set out in regulations.

In some cases some people go to funerals where more than 1,000 people are in attendance. This is how the virus is spread – through carelessness and through recklessness.

It is concerning that many are downplaying the seriousness of the virus, despite all evidence to the contrary and what we have cautioned on numerous occasions.

We now know of several tragic instances where people who have organised or attended social gatherings, including gatherings with family, have contracted the virus and have died.

In the midst of such a pandemic, getting into a taxi without a face mask, gathering to meet friends, attending parties or even visiting family, can too easily spread the virus and cost lives.

This may be a disease that is caused by a virus, but it is spread by human conduct and behaviour.

We are in the midst of a deadly pandemic and we must act accordingly, in line with the prevention measures we continue to communicate.

We are all required to be responsible, careful and compassionate. The truth is that we are not helpless in the face of this storm.

Scientists and other scenario planners have presented us with models that project that South Africa may have between 40,000 and 50,000 deaths before the end of this year. We must make it our single most important task to prove these projections wrong.

Through our own actions – as individuals, as families, as communities – we can and we must change the course of this pandemic in our country.

We are by now all familiar with what we need to do to protect ourselves and others from infection.

We need to wear a cloth mask that covers our nose and mouth whenever we leave home. We must continue to regularly wash our hands with soap and water or sanitiser.

We must continue to clean and sanitise all surfaces in all public spaces.

Most importantly, we must keep a safe distance – of at least 2 metres – from other people. There is now emerging evidence that the virus may also be carried in tiny particles in the air in places that are crowded, closed or have poor air circulation.

For this reason we must immediately improve the indoor environment of public places where the risk of infection is greatest.

We must increase natural ventilation, avoid the recirculation of air and minimise the number of people sharing the same space.

We must do this in all health care facilities, nursing homes, shops, offices, workplaces, schools, restaurants and public transport.

We have the power within ourselves, working with each other, to limit the damage that this virus does to our people, our society and our economy.

As we confront the rapid rise in infections, as we ready ourselves for the difficult days, weeks and months that lie ahead, we need to remind ourselves of the absolute necessity of the measures we have taken.

On the advice of health scientists and experts, our decision to declare a nation-wide lockdown prevented a massive early surge of infections when our health services were less prepared, which would have resulted in a far greater loss of lives.

We knew that we could not escape the virus, but that we needed to delay its spread for as long as possible.

In the time that we had, we have taken important measures to strengthen our health response.

We have conducted more than two million coronavirus tests and community health

workers have done more than 20 million screenings.

We have made available almost 28,000 hospital beds for COVID-19 patients and have constructed functional field hospitals across the country.

We now have over 37,000 quarantine beds in private and public facilities across the country, ready to isolate those who cannot do so at home.

We have secured 1,700 additional ventilators, and companies in South Africa are in the process of producing another 12,000 ventilation devices for delivery between the end of July and the end of August.

We have procured and delivered millions of items of personal protective equipment to hospitals, clinics and schools across the country to protect our frontline workers.

We have recruited and continue to recruit additional nurses, doctors and emergency health personnel.

We still have a serious shortage of more than 12,000 health workers, mostly nurses, doctors and physiotherapists.

Thanks to the contributions by business and individuals, the Solidarity Fund has invested R1.9 billion in our health response, providing personal protective equipment and other supplies for our health facilities.

It is generally known that the ultimate defence the world could have against coronavirus would be a cure or a vaccine.

A vaccine against this virus does not exist.

South Africa has joined, and is playing an important role in, the global effort to develop vaccines and medicines to treat COVID-19.

Our country has an established vaccine manufacturing capability and expertise in the development and trial of a range of vaccines.

We continue to make progress in our efforts to deal with COVID 19, but our greatest challenge still lies ahead.

Health facilities in several provinces are already under significant strain.

We have heard of instances where people who are infected have been turned away from health facilities due to a lack of beds or essential supplies.

This is deeply worrying.

It means we have to move with even greater urgency to strengthen our strategy to manage the peak of infections.

We are focusing on a number of priority actions in the coming weeks.

Across all provinces, we are working to further increase the number of general ward and critical beds available for COVID-19 patients. This must be done.

Ward capacity is being freed up in a number of hospitals by delaying non-urgent care, the conversion of some areas of hospitals into additional ward space and the erection or expansion of field hospitals.

We are working to increase supplies of oxygen, ventilators and other equipment for those who will need critical care, including by diverting the supply of oxygen from other purposes.

Due to the lack of critical care facilities in rural areas, measures are being put in place to refer patients to better-equipped urban centres.

To deal with shortages of health personnel in some areas, we are employing more doctors and nurses and negotiating with health science faculties to deploy volunteers to provide medical, nursing, physiotherapy, pharmacy and general patient support.

I have been extremely proud to see medical students volunteering at hospitals and clinics, exemplifying the highest values of the medical profession.

I commend them for their unwavering patriotism and commitment to public service. We are working to reduce the turnaround time for testing to no more than 48 hours. We are introducing antibody testing for community-based surveillance to estimate the population that has been infected with this virus.

These actions together represent an extraordinary mobilisation of effort and resources. But it is not only the health system that needs to be strengthened.

This moment of crisis requires that we mobilise society on a massive scale to confront this pandemic.

We are working with traditional leaders, religious formations, civil society organisations, business associations, unions and other bodies to spread the message about prevention and care.

We need to follow the example of communities that have set up 'coronavirus forums' at a ward level to get residents involved in fighting this disease.

As government, we are deploying Ministers and Deputy Ministers to every district in the country to ensure that the local response receives the support that it needs.

They will also be initiating gender-based violence prevention programmes at district level. A vital part of our strategy to contain the spread of the virus is to identify those people who are infected, to identify those people they have been in close

contact with, and ensure that they immediately isolate themselves from others.

We know there are some people who are reluctant to isolate themselves – either at home or in government facilities – but it is essential that we do so if we are to break the chain of transmission.

Social workers need to work with them to help them secure their homes when they are quarantined.

We are deploying digital technologies to strengthen the identification, tracing and isolation of contacts, and to provide support to those who test positive.

In several provinces, those who take a coronavirus test can now receive their result via WhatsApp and provide details of their contacts through this platform.

By responding to messages from the Department of Health and providing this information, you can help to stop the virus from spreading further.

By providing a correct cell phone number and personal details when you test for the coronavirus, you can make the task of our healthcare workers easier.

If you have been in close contact with anyone who has tested positive for the coronavirus, you must self-quarantine at home or in a place of quarantine.

Similarly, you need to remain at home or in a place of quarantine while you are waiting for a test result to ensure that you do not transmit the virus without knowing it.

If you test positive for coronavirus and have diabetes or hypertension and you are short of breath, seek care at a hospital immediately.

This is the practical action we can and should take to protect those around us. It is precisely this consideration and care towards others that will save lives.

In the light of the increased rate of infection, the National Coronavirus Command Council and Cabinet have considered returning all or parts of the country to a higher alert level, either to level 4 or level 5.

The advice we have received is that taking this step now would not necessarily achieve a significant reduction in the rate of transmission and would come at an extraordinary

economic cost, putting more livelihoods at risk and potentially causing long-lasting social harm.

As we now approach the peak of infections, we need to take extra precautions and tighten existing measures to slow down the rate of transmission.

On the recommendation of the National Coronavirus Command Council, Cabinet has therefore decided that the country will remain at alert level 3 at this time, but that we should however strengthen the enforcement of existing regulations and take certain additional measures.

In order to reduce the rate of transmission, we had earlier said that the wearing of cloth masks will be mandatory.

While many South Africans are wearing masks, there are however some among us who are not wearing masks when in public.

It is therefore important that we should enforce the wearing of masks. Regulations on the wearing of masks will be strengthened.

Employers, shop owners and managers, public transport operators, and managers and owners of any other public building are now legally obliged to ensure that anyone entering their premises or vehicle must be wearing a mask.

All workplaces and all institutions need to ensure that there is a designated coronavirus official responsible for making sure that all regulations and all precautions are strictly adhered to.

Taxis undertaking local trips will now be permitted to increase their capacity to 100%, while long distance taxis will not be allowed to exceed 70% occupancy, on condition that new risk mitigation protocols related to masks, vehicle sanitising and open windows are followed.

As we head towards the peak of infections, it is vital that we do not burden our clinics and hospitals with alcohol-related injuries that could have been avoided.

This is a fight to save every life, and we need to save every bed.

We have therefore decided that in order to conserve hospital capacity, the sale, dispensing and distribution of alcohol will be suspended with immediate effect.

There is now clear evidence that the resumption of alcohol sales has resulted in substantial pressure being put on hospitals, including trauma and ICU units, due to motor vehicle accidents, violence and related trauma.

Most of these and other trauma injuries occur at night.

Therefore, as an additional measures to reduce the pressure on hospitals, a curfew will be put in place between the hours of 9pm and 4am.

Apart from people who need to travel to and from work or who need to seek urgent medical or other assistance during this time, everyone will be required to remain at home.

The curfew will take effect from tomorrow, Monday, 13 July 2020 at 9pm.

We are taking these measures fully aware that they impose unwelcome restrictions on people's lives.

They are, however, necessary to see us through the peak of the disease.

At the same time, we have decided to ease restrictions on activities that pose a lower risk of infection and are important for economic or educational purposes.

As part of resuming economic activity, all auctions will be permitted subject to protocols similar to those that currently apply to agricultural auctions.

Parks will be open for exercise, but not for any form of gathering.

After careful consideration of expert advice, there are still some activities that present too much of a risk to permit at this stage.

For this reason, family visits and other social activities will unfortunately not be allowed for now.

I know that this places a great burden on families and individuals and can cause great emotional strain, especially for those with elderly parents.

It goes against our very nature as social beings, but it is a hardship that we must endure for that much longer to protect those we love and care for from this disease.

To ensure that we have the means to continue to respond effectively to this severe health emergency, Cabinet has approved the extension of the national state of disaster to the 15th of August 2020.

There is no way that we can avoid the coronavirus storm. But we can limit the damage that it can cause to our lives.

As a nation we have come together to support each other, to provide comfort to those who are ill and to promote acceptance of people living with the virus.

I have been encouraged by the COVID-19 support groups that have been started online where people can share their experiences and give encouragement, and by the work of religious bodies, community groups and traditional leaders to support people in areas across the country.

This is an important part of breaking the stigma around the virus and motivates those who are ill to seek care and not live in fear of victimisation.

I wish to pay tribute to the many thousands of people who are on the frontline of our fight against coronavirus.

These are the nurses, doctors and other health workers who are working tirelessly to save lives; the police, soldiers and traffic officials who are responsible for our safety; the essential service workers who have been keeping our country functioning; the religious leaders who have provided comfort and guidance; and the media workers who have kept the country informed.

We remember those frontline workers who have lost their lives to COVID-19.

We grieve with their families, hopeful that they may find some comfort in the support and gratitude of those that they so selflessly served.

The difficulty, struggle and sacrifice of the past few months are about to get significantly harder and our endurance will be sorely tested.

But if there is one thing we have learned over the past few months, it is that South Africans remain united in the face of a common threat.

We have stood for each other and stood by each other.

Let us firm the hand of solidarity we have extended to the vulnerable and the destitute.

Let us lay the foundation for National Health Insurance so that all people have access to the quality health care they need regardless of their ability to pay.

As we work together to preserve life, we must begin to rebuild our economy and deepen measures to protect those whose livelihoods have been so badly impacted by the lockdown.

The days, weeks and months to come will present some of the greatest tests of our nationhood.

Let us remember that we share a collective responsibility to bring down the rate of infections. Let us remember that every individual action we undertake can and does make a difference.

Let us remember that whether we are a family with an infected member, a business owner worried for their staff or a parent concerned for the safety of their children, that none of us stands alone.

Now, more than ever, we are responsible for the lives of those around us. We will weather this storm.

We will restore our country to health and to prosperity. We shall overcome.

I thank you.

