



President Cyril Ramaphosa: Country's response to Coronavirus Covid-19 pandemic

22 Mar 2022

My Fellow South Africans,

It is almost exactly two years since I stood before you to announce that South Africa would be entering a nation-wide lockdown to contain the spread of the COVID-19 virus. This was a drastic and unprecedented measure.

But it slowed the spread of the virus so that our health facilities – and indeed our society – had time to prepare for the anticipated surge in infections.

Since then, we have had to adjust our response as the pandemic has changed, as infections have risen and fallen, and as our health facilities have come under pressure.

For two years, our lives have been shaped by this pandemic.

South Africa has had more than 3.7 million cases and has recorded nearly 100,000 COVID-19 deaths.

The pandemic has changed the way we work, travel, worship and socialise.

It has shattered many livelihoods and devastated our economy, leading to the closure of many businesses and the loss of some two million jobs.

Yet it has also shown South Africans to be a caring and compassionate people, coming to each other's assistance at the hour of the greatest need.

When we were called upon to observe restrictions on movement, gatherings and various activities, as South Africans, we did so, knowing that it is for the sake of our health and lives and the good of the country.

Over the past two years, we have taken unprecedented actions to strengthen our health system.

We hired more people to deal with the pandemic, built more hospital and laboratory capacity and ensured that COVID patients are well cared for in our hospitals.

We are now at a watershed moment.

We are now ready to enter a new phase in our management of the pandemic.

After four waves of infection, fewer people are becoming severely ill and requiring hospitalisation. There are far fewer deaths than before.

Our scientists tell us that this is mainly because some 60 to 80% of the population has some form of immunity to the virus, either from previous infection or vaccination.

From the experience of the past two years, our health services have learnt to manage the disease more effectively.

We have gotten used to wearing masks and washing our hands regularly.

Most importantly, 48 per cent of all adults have received at least one vaccine dose.

We therefore enter the third year of this pandemic more hopeful than ever before.

While the pandemic is not yet over, and while we remain cautious, we see many parts of our daily life returning to normal.

We see our economy returning to full operation.

We feel the fear and despair of the last two years lifting from our shoulders.

Due to the changing nature of the pandemic, and due to the progress that has been made through our collective efforts, we intend to lift the National State of Disaster as soon as public comment on the health regulations published by the Minister of health has been completed.

These regulations, when finalised, will replace the State of Disaster regulations as the legal instrument that we use to manage the pandemic.

All South Africans are invited to make comments on the draft regulations before the 16th of April.

What should be clear is that the end of the National State of Disaster does not mean the end of the pandemic.

It just means that we are changing the way we manage the pandemic, and we will be relying on health regulations rather than disaster management regulations.

It means that we are learning to live with the virus in our presence.

It means that we are returning, as far as possible, to the lives that we lived before the pandemic.

It means that we are opening our economy still further, and that we are resuming many of the social and cultural activities that we have missed over the last two years.

Since October last year, the country has been at Adjusted Alert Level 1, which has meant that many normal activities have resumed with health guidelines followed at all times.

Most of the restrictions on economic activity have been lifted.

We are now able to ease the restrictions further.

In deciding which restrictions to ease and which to keep in place, we are guided – as before – by the advice of the Ministerial Advisory Committee on COVID-19.

We have also looked to the experiences of other countries, including those where the complete lifting of restrictions has been followed by a surge in infections and deaths.

Knowing that we have to enter a new phase in our management of the pandemic we took time to consult widely with various stakeholders, including religious bodies and traditional leaders.

Earlier today, we held a meeting of the Presidential Coordinating Council, which brings together Premiers, Mayors of all Metros, Ministers and Deputy Ministers, representatives of the South African Local Government Association, as well as traditional leaders.

Based on those consultations and the recommendations of the National Coronavirus Command Council, Cabinet has decided to ease several restrictions as part of Adjusted Alert Level 1.

The restrictions on gatherings are being significantly changed.

In previous regulations, the emphasis was on placing an upper limit on the number of people who could attend a gathering.

The approach going forward is that both indoor and outdoor venues can now take up to 50 percent of their capacity provided that the criteria for entrance are proof of vaccination or a COVID test not older than 72 hours.

But where there is no provision for proof of vaccination or a COVID test, then the current upper limit will remain – of 1,000 people indoors and 2,000 people outdoors.

This change to the restrictions on gatherings will be of great benefit to the sporting, cultural, entertainment and events industries in particular.

This means that if we are vaccinated or have recently tested negative, we will be able to return to watching sports in stadiums and attending music concerts, theatre performances, conferences and other events.

The maximum number of people permitted at a funeral will increase from 100 to 200.

As before, night vigils, after-funeral gatherings and ‘after-tears’ gatherings are not allowed.

There are also important changes to the regulation on the wearing of masks.

As before, it is mandatory to wear a cloth mask or similar covering over the nose and mouth when in public indoor spaces.

However, a mask is not required when outdoors.

This means that we still need to wear masks when in shops, malls, offices, factories, taxis, buses, trains or any other indoor public space.

But we do not need to wear masks when walking on the street or in an open space, when exercising outdoors or when attending an outdoor gathering.

The regulations on social distancing are also being changed, requiring that a space of 1 metre is maintained between persons in all settings except schools.

There are also changes to the regulations on international travel. Travellers entering South Africa will need to show proof of vaccination or a negative PCR test not older than 72 hours.

All unvaccinated travellers entering the country who want to be vaccinated will be offered a vaccination.

These measures will take effect from tomorrow, Wednesday the 23rd of March 2022, once the new regulations are gazetted.

With these changes, almost all restrictions on social and economic activity will have been lifted.

Going forward, our most important defences against the disease are, firstly, vaccination and, secondly, the observance of basic measures, such as wearing masks indoors.

The further easing of the remaining restrictions will require that we increase the rate of vaccination among South Africans.

The vaccine has been shown to significantly reduce severe illness.

Statistics from our health facilities, clearly show that people who are not vaccinated stand a higher chance of being hospitalised or dying from COVID-19.

Vaccination is likely to reduce transmission at home and at places like schools and universities where there is close contact.

Therefore, while we welcome the fact that more than 68 per cent of people older than 60 years have been vaccinated, we are concerned that only 35 per cent of people between 18 and 35 years have been vaccinated,

It is vitally important that we get many more of our people between 18 and 35 years vaccinated, and that is why we launched the #Ke Ready campaign last month.

This campaign includes messages developed by young people and focuses on making the case for people between 18 and 35 years to vaccinate.

In addition, we would like to encourage those who are vaccinated to go and receive their booster doses.

If we are all vaccinated, we can turn our energy, resources and effort to rebuilding our economy and creating much-needed jobs.

Two years ago, as we announced the start of a nation-wide lockdown, I said that in the days, weeks and months ahead our resolve, our resourcefulness and our unity as a nation would be tested as never before.

I called on all of us to play our part:

“To be courageous, to be patient, and above all, to show compassion.”

The people of South Africa have responded to that call, time and again.

Once more, we are all called upon to play our part – to get vaccinated as we embark with hope and determination on a new era in our fight against the pandemic.

I thank you

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