

President Cyril Ramaphosa: South Africa's response to Coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic

25 Jul 2021

My Fellow South Africans,

Since I last addressed you fourteen days ago, we have been fighting a battle on two fronts – the first against the deadly coronavirus, the second against the actions of those who have sought to create instability and chaos.

We have marshalled all of our resources to restore stability and order to KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng, to ensure that we stabilise the situation and ensure that the violence of two weeks ago is ended.

To address these two crises, we have to take several actions at once.

Firstly, we have to contain the spread of the coronavirus and limit its impact on economic activity.

Secondly, we have to accelerate our vaccination programme so that the vast majority of adult South Africans can be vaccinated before the end of the year.

Thirdly, we need to ensure that peace and stability is maintained throughout the country and that there are no further incidents of violence.

Fourthly, in response to both the pandemic and the recent violence, we need to provide support and relief to poor households, in order to alleviate the hardships they are going through and reduce hunger.

Fifthly, we need to help businesses to rebuild. These are businesses affected by looting and destruction of property and those affected by the pandemic and the necessary measures we have taken to contain it.

Finally, we need to accelerate the implementation of our Economic Reconstruction and Recovery Plan to rebuild our economy, create employment and drive inclusive growth.

The coronavirus pandemic is the greatest threat to the lives and health of our people and to the recovery and transformation of our economy.

Accordingly we need to continue to do everything in our means to contain the spread of the virus.

The latest figures suggest that we have largely passed the peak of the third wave of infections, although there are areas in the country where we still need to be concerned because the rates of infection have not yet shown signs of decline.

The measures that we put in place for the past 28 days, alongside the continued adherence of South Africans to basic health precautions, have been effective in reducing the rate of infection.

The average number of daily new infections over the last week was around 12,000 new cases a day, which represents a 20 per cent drop from the previous week.

In the last two weeks, the number of new infections in Gauteng – which has been the epicentre of the third wave – has steadily been declining.

However, as we have observed before, there are significant differences between provinces.

As infections in Gauteng fall, daily new infections in the Western Cape, Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal continue to rise.

There has also been a concerning rise of infections in the Northern Cape after a period of relative stability.

In all these cases, infections are being driven by the Delta variant, which as we said before is far more transmissible than previous variants.

Now, more than ever, we need to adhere to the basic precautions to limit the spread of the virus from one person to another.

We know that indoor gatherings, particularly in places that have poor ventilation, are the major cause of outbreaks and super spreader events.

We must continue wearing our masks at all times when in public, keep our distance from others and always ensure that windows are open and that there is a flow of fresh air.

The overall decline in new infections means that it is possible to gradually ease some of the restrictions on gatherings, movement and the sale of alcohol.

Based on the recommendations of the Ministerial Advisory Committee on COVID-19, and inputs from the President's Coordinating Council, Cabinet this afternoon decided that the country should be moved from Adjusted Alert Level 4 and be placed on Adjusted Alert Level 3.

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

This means that:

- The hours of curfew will stay the same, starting at 10pm and end at 4am.
- Interprovincial travel for leisure may resume.
- Non-essential establishments like restaurants, taverns, bars and fitness centres may be opened. These establishments will however need to close by 9pm to allow their employees and patrons to travel home before the start of the curfew.
- Gatherings will be allowed but 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.

Gatherings include religious services, political events and social gatherings.

The limits on venue capacity also apply to restaurants, gyms, fitness centres, 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 and after-funeral gatherings are still not allowed.
- The sale of alcohol from retail outlets for off-site consumption will be permitted between 10am and 6pm from Monday to Thursday.
Alcohol sales for on-site consumption will be permitted as per licence conditions up to 8pm.
- Schools will re-open tomorrow, Monday the 26th of July, according to strict health protocols and other measures announced by the Minister of Basic Education.

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.

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 also ensure that the appropriate social distancing measures are in place and are 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.

As we ease restrictions, we must remember that infections remain high and that we need to continue to exercise caution.

As we have always said, our most effective weapon in the fight against COVID-19 is an effective and comprehensive vaccination programme.

In the last few weeks, our vaccination campaign has made huge strides.

We are now administering more than 240,000 vaccines every week day.

A month ago, this figure stood at around 100,000 vaccines per week day.

As a result, we have now administered more than 6.3 million vaccines, with over 10 per cent of our population having received a vaccine dose.

This has been possible through close collaboration between government and the private sector and with the active support of other social partners.

In the coming weeks, we will substantially increase the rate of vaccination.

We are increasing the number of vaccination sites and improving the vaccination registration system.

We will also increase our vaccination capacity on weekends.

We will now allow people between the ages of 18 and 34 to be vaccinated from the 1st of September 2021.

This will be in addition to the age groups that are currently eligible, which is everyone over 35 years of age.

We are now able to allow people to present themselves at a vaccination site without an appointment and be registered and vaccinated.

This substantial increase in the rate of vaccination is made possible by improvements in the supply of vaccines.

Within the next two to three months, we are scheduled to receive around 31 million additional doses from Pfizer and Johnson & Johnson.

This supply pipeline means that there will be sufficient vaccine doses available for the rest of the year.

We have made tremendous progress in addressing the challenges we faced as a country and the continent in access to vaccines.

As a result of our negotiations with pharmaceutical companies and various developed economy governments have, our country and our continent has been able to secure vaccines and is able to manufacture vaccines on our continent.

Aspen based in Gqeberha will from October be manufacturing vaccines solely for the African continent.

A few weeks ago the World Health Organization chose South Africa as hub for the manufacture of vaccines.

A few days ago, the Biovac Institute in Cape Town was appointed to manufacture the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine for distribution within Africa.

While there is ample supply of vaccines for the short term, we must ensure that this supply is delivered on time and without disruption.

It is also important to monitor the emergence of new variants and to secure access to future vaccines that are adapted to these variants.

I urge all South Africans to register for vaccination as soon as they are eligible, whether online, via WhatsApp or USSD, or by calling the toll-free number on 0800 029 999.

Fellow South Africans,

Two weeks ago, the provinces of KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng were hit by deliberate, planned and coordinated acts of violence designed to create the conditions for unrest.

This led to the loss of more than 300 lives, the looting of shops, warehouses and factories, damage to critical infrastructure, and disruption of the country's economy.

We are still counting the cost of this violence, and coming to terms with the destruction that it left in its wake.

I speak of the lives that were cut short, and the families that lost their loved ones.

I speak of the business owner who in a single day lost what it took years to build.

And of the mothers and fathers who lost their jobs as a warehouse went up in flames, and now wonder how they will feed their children.

We have a duty to support those affected by this violence, and ensure that it never happens again.

To ensure that order and stability are maintained, particularly in KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng, we have increased the deployment of SAPS and SANDF personnel.

We have maintained this deployment in areas regarded as potential hotspots, as well as key economic and government infrastructure, shopping centres, warehouses and factories.

Security forces are also responsible for keeping critical supply routes open and safeguarding the transport of goods.

Through these measures, we have been able to restore order in affected areas and to return the ports, freight rail network and road transport to full operational capacity.

Investigations into the violence and those behind it are continuing, led by our specialised law enforcement units, with a view to speedy arrests and effective prosecutions.

Special measures have been put in place to manage the large number of suspects who have been arrested for offences related to the unrest.

The SAPS has activated its Community Policing Strategy in areas throughout the country, which has involved communities in preventing further incidents.

I want to make it clear that law and order will be maintained.

There will be further arrests, particularly of those who conceptualised, planned and executed these actions that have led to so much destruction and loss of life.

Although calm has been restored to these areas, the impact of the violence and destruction continues to be felt by households, employees and businesses.

We are taking decisive action now to secure the livelihoods of millions of people that have been threatened by both the pandemic and the unrest.

This evening we are announcing a range of measures to support the recovery of the economy and provide relief to the poor and those who are vulnerable as a result of the measures that we had to impose to deal with COVID-19.

To support those who have no means of supporting themselves, we are reinstating the Social Relief of Distress Grant to provide a monthly payment of R350 until the end of March 2022.

This has been made possible by the slight improvement we have seen in our revenue collection.

We are expanding the number of people who are eligible for this grant by allowing unemployed caregivers who currently receive a Child Support Grant to apply.

Details on the reinstatement of the grant, including the process for application, will be announced shortly.

This will build on the strength of our existing social protection system, which is one of the greatest achievements of our democracy.

In addition to the food relief being provided by the Department of Social Development, government is contributing R400 million to the Humanitarian Crisis Relief Fund established by the Solidarity Fund to assist with the immediate needs of affected communities.

We are also implementing measures to help businesses to rebuild.

The most immediate need is to ensure that those businesses that were damaged or looted are able to rebuild and reopen as quickly as possible.

We are one of the few countries in the world to have a state-owned insurance company, SASRIA, which provides cover against incidents of public violence, strikes, riots and unrest.

Businesses that are insured will be covered by SASRIA.

SASRIA has committed to expedite the payment of all valid claims, and is working together with private insurers to ensure that assessments are completed without delay.

Government will ensure that SASRIA is able to honour all of its obligations and will provide whatever support is necessary in this regard.

In addition, however, some businesses that were victims of this violence may not have been insured.

This includes many small and medium-sized businesses, whether formal or informal.

Many of these businesses have lost everything, and will not be able to rebuild on their own.

We will not abandon them in their time of need.

We are therefore working to extend support to uninsured businesses that were affected by the violence.

Government will set aside dedicated funds for this purpose and we will soon announce a mechanism for these businesses to apply for support.

We will also be reprioritising funding for SMMEs affected by the pandemic through a once-off business survival funding mechanism.

We are also working with large business to determine their contribution to the support of SMMEs, job creation and eradication of hunger and poverty.

Two weeks ago, we announced that the COVID-19 TERS scheme would be extended for those sectors which were affected by Alert Level 4 restrictions during the past 28 days.

Applications for this period are open, and the UIF will facilitate payments as quickly as possible to support workers who have not received an income.

Most importantly, the UIF will provide income support to all those employees who have lost jobs as a result of the recent unrest.

This will ensure that jobs are protected and that workers can continue to earn an income as those businesses take time to rebuild.

While the TERS scheme has provided crucial support for many sectors that have been unable to operate, there is a need to provide even further relief to help businesses to recover.

We are therefore expanding the Employment Tax Incentive for a period of four months to include any employee earning below R6 500 and to increase the incentive amount by up to R750 per month.

This will encourage employers to hire and retain employees, especially those in the retail and hospitality sectors which have been worst affected.

We will also defer payment of PAYE taxes for a period of three months to provide businesses with additional cash flow, with an automatic deferral of 35 per cent of PAYE liabilities for employers with revenue below R100 million.

The payment of excise taxes by the alcohol sector will be deferred for a period of three months, to ease the burden on the sector as it recovers.

These interventions are designed to extend as much relief as possible to individuals and businesses that are in need of support, without compromising our fiscal sustainability.

No country can expect its economy to grow, or to live in peace and harmony, while many of its citizens remain marginalised, hungry and excluded.

The impact of recent events on our economy has made the implementation of our Economic Reconstruction and Recovery Plan even more important.

We have been working closely with our social partners on the further measures we will take to address poverty, accelerate the implementation of reforms, drive inclusive growth and create jobs.

We will shortly be able to make further announcements in this regard.

Fellow South Africans,

The effect of the recent violence on investor confidence is a great threat to our recovery.

We are taking steps to strengthen the capacity and preparedness of our security forces to prevent similar incidents in future.

This includes responding more quickly and decisively to reports that we are now receiving of extortion by criminal groups as businesses start to rebuild, especially in KwaZulu-Natal.

Anyone who threatens or engages in violence will face consequences.

While we have acknowledged that our response was too slow, our security forces have demonstrated that they are able to ensure stability and order.

More importantly, South Africans have demonstrated to the world that we are committed to democratic government, that we oppose violence and criminality, and that we will stand up to anyone who seeks to destabilise our country.

Our greatest strength lies in our Constitution, in the protection that it provides for our rights and freedoms, and in our open and democratic society.

Our constitutional order has stood firm.

As we move to rebuild our country from the effects of this violence and from the impact of this pandemic, let us do what our Constitution calls on us to do.

We must continue to heal the divisions of the past and establish a society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights.

The foundations of our democracy are based on the will of the people.

To strengthen our democracy we are called upon to improve the quality of life of all citizens and free the potential of each person.

It is our collective duty as South Africans to work together to build a united and democratic South Africa able to take its rightful place as a sovereign state in the family of nations.

Let us all join hands to continue building the South Africa of our dreams despite the many challenges we face.

May God protect our people.

Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika. Morena boloka setjhaba sa heso.

God seën Suid-Afrika. God bless South Africa.

Mudzimu fhatutshedza Afurika. Hosi katekisa Afrika.

I thank you.