

President Cyril Ramaphosa: National effort to contain Coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic

30 May 2021

Fellow South Africans,

It has been some time since we last held a family meeting.

When I last spoke to you, exactly two months ago, South Africa was recovering from a deadly second wave of coronavirus infections.

Then, the number of new daily infections had stabilised at a relatively low level, and we had placed the country on Coronavirus Alert Level 1.

While we continued to urge caution, the low levels of transmission allowed us to ease restrictions on the size of gatherings.

But now, after several months of low transmission, the number of infections has begun to rise sharply in several parts of the country.

We have seen a sustained increase over the last four weeks.

Over the last seven days, we have seen an average of 3,745 daily new infections.

This is an increase of 31 per cent on the previous week, and an increase of 66 per cent on the week before that.

The proportion of COVID-19 tests that are positive has more than doubled in the last month from around 4 per cent to more than 11 per cent, even as we have increased testing across the country.

We are advised that a positivity rate of over 5 per cent is a cause for concern.

The provinces of Free State, Northern Cape, North West and Gauteng have reached the threshold of a third wave of infections.

It may only be a matter of time before the country as a whole will have entered a third wave.

According to our health experts, the recent surge in new infections is due to the increasing number of social gatherings where people are not observing essential health protocols.

These protocols include the wearing of masks, social distancing, ensuring adequate ventilation and limits on the number of people who attend gatherings.

Other sites of increased transmission are funerals and so-called 'after tears' parties, as well as camps and sporting activities at schools.

Because rates of infection have been low for some time, and because we are all suffering from pandemic fatigue, we have tended to become complacent.

We have not been as vigilant about wearing our masks all the time, we have not been avoiding crowded places, and we have been socialising more.

As a result, infections are surging again.

The increase in daily cases is following the same trajectory as it did at the start of the previous two waves.

We have seen in other countries the tragic consequences of allowing the virus to spread unchecked.

The Ministerial Advisory Committee on COVID-19 has therefore recommended that the country urgently implement further restrictions to limit the increase in infections.

It bases this recommendation on the sustained increase in new cases in the last 14 days, increased hospital admissions in almost all provinces and an increase in the proportion of COVID tests that are positive.

Further restrictions are necessary to ensure that health facilities are not overwhelmed and that lives that could be saved are not lost.

Delaying the spread of the virus is especially important now to allow as many people as possible to be vaccinated before the third wave reaches its peak.

These recommendations have been discussed at the National Coronavirus Command Council and, earlier today, with Premiers, mayors and traditional leaders in the President's Coordinating Council.

Based on these discussions, Cabinet has therefore decided that the country will be placed on Adjusted Alert Level 2 with effect from tomorrow.

This means that:

The hours of curfew will start at 11pm and end at 4am.

Non-essential establishments like restaurants, bars and fitness centres will need to close by 10pm. This is to allow their employees and patrons to travel home before the start of the curfew.

All gatherings will be limited to a maximum of 100 people indoors and 250 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.

Several important measures remain in place.

It remains mandatory for every person to wear a face mask that 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, and that the appropriate social distancing measures are in place.

If you test positive for COVID-19, you must self-isolate at home for a period of 10 days from when you first developed symptoms.

If you have been in contact with a person who has COVID-19, you must also self-quarantine for a period of 10 days following your exposure, even if you do not show any symptoms.

Identifying and isolating all contacts of a positive case is our best mechanism to prevent the virus from spreading further, and so it is very important that we all obey the rules for isolation and quarantine.

Funerals remain restricted to no more than 100 people, and, as before, night vigils, after-funeral gatherings and 'after-tears' gatherings are not allowed.

While the country is headed towards a third wave of infections, we do not yet know how severe this wave will be or for how long it will last.

According to the scientists that advise government, the severity of this third wave will largely be determined by the amount of contact each of us has with other people.

This means that each of us needs to think about all the people we come into contact with each day and do everything we can to limit those contacts.

Sometimes it is unavoidable to be in contact with other people, such as at work or when shopping or in public transport.

In such cases, it is important that we strictly observe all the health protocols by wearing a mask, keeping our distance from others and ensuring proper ventilation.

But wherever possible, we should cut down on our contacts during this time.

That may mean postponing social engagements, avoiding public spaces and not travelling unless absolutely necessary.

Gatherings are the greatest sources of transmission, whether its weddings, funerals, social parties, religious services, political meetings or simply gatherings of family and friends.

We must remember that the virus does not move from place to place by itself; it relies on the movement of people.

The less we travel, the less the virus is spread.

It is especially important to avoid indoor spaces, as the coronavirus is spread through the air when a person speaks, coughs or sneezes.

If you need to meet someone, including a member of your family, it is safer to do so outside in a well-ventilated space.

Those who are at particular risk, including the elderly and those with comorbidities, should exercise caution and should limit their contacts as much as possible.

If each of us makes this effort now, we will help to flatten the curve of infections.

We will reduce the pressure on our hospitals, and, in doing so, we will save many lives.

As we continue to focus on reducing transmission of the virus through our behaviour, we have embarked on the biggest mass vaccination programme in our country's history.

Two weeks ago, we started the second phase of the vaccination programme, targeting the balance of our health workers who had not yet been vaccinated during the first phase and all those in the country who are over 60 years of age.

This follows the first phase of the programme, in which nearly 480,000 health workers were vaccinated.

More than 67 per cent of public health workers have been vaccinated

These health workers received the Johnson & Johnson vaccine, which only requires a single dose.

Since the evidence shows that older people are at a far greater risk of severe COVID-19 illness and death, we have prioritised the elderly for this second phase.

Over the last two weeks, over 480,000 people have received the first dose of the Pfizer vaccine as part of the public vaccination campaign.

Because the Pfizer vaccine requires two doses to provide maximum immunity, these people will need to have second dose 42 days after their first dose.

In total, over 960,000 people in South Africa have received one vaccine dose.

Within the next few days, we will have administered vaccine doses to more than one million of the most vulnerable South Africans.

It has been heart-warming to see images of our elderly citizens receiving their vaccine, and to read the many stories of kindness and solidarity from those who have visited a vaccination site.

The positive experiences of the rollout so far reflect both the dedication and professionalism of our healthcare workers, and the intense preparation that has gone into ensuring that the rollout is successful.

The Electronic Vaccine Data System forms the backbone of the programme to manage registration and the allocation of vaccines.

The system links people who have registered to a vaccination site near them.

The system enables the national team to monitor vaccine use and to deploy vaccines to where they are needed.

Registration and vaccination of those over 60 years is going well.

We now have over 3 million people registered on the Electronic Vaccine Data System.

Since this is the first time this system is being used, it is understandable that there have been some initial problems, which have inconvenienced people and sometimes caused delays.

Fortunately, these have been attended to quickly and the system is being continually adapted and strengthened as the rollout proceeds.

There are other challenges we are working to address.

A significant number of the elderly have encountered difficulties in registering on the Electronic Vaccine Data System.

This is due to lack of access to the tools need to register online, such as a computer, internet access or mobile phone, or difficulties following the instructions in English.

We are working to get around these problems, and a huge drive to support the elderly to register is underway.

There are four ways that you can register to receive your COVID-19 vaccine:

By using the online registration platform available on the SA Coronavirus website

By dialling *134*832# and registering via USSD

By sending the word "register" via WhatsApp to 0600 123 456

By calling the national toll-free call centre on 0800 029 999, where somebody will help you to register and answer any questions about the vaccination rollout

Each and every one of us can help our parents, our grandparents, or the elderly people in our community to register on the system and get protected.

All of the vaccines that are approved for use in South Africa are safe and effective.

They have carefully been tested in large trials and subjected to a rigorous approval process by the South African Health Products Regulatory Authority and by a number of health authorities around the world.

Most importantly, they all provide protection against severe illness or death as a result of COVID-19.

We are continuing discussions with other vaccine manufacturers so that we are able to include different vaccines in our programme.

Some of these manufacturers are in the process of seeking the necessary approvals from our health products authority.

The mass vaccination campaign is a joint effort with all our partners.

There are now more than 400 vaccination sites in operation across the country in both the public and private sectors.

As we have previously reported, we have secured enough vaccines to reach all adults in the country, which is around 40 million people.

This includes 31 million doses of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine, which is a single dose, and which will be manufactured here in South Africa.

It includes 20 million doses of the Pfizer vaccine, which requires two doses to provide full protection.

The scheduled delivery of the Johnson & Johnson vaccines has however been delayed due to regulatory issues related to lack of adherence to proper standards at a manufacturing plant in the United States.

We are waiting for these issues to be resolved before the first batch of Johnson & Johnson vaccines can be released from the facility in Gqeberha in the Eastern Cape.

While this is a challenge that has affected the supply of vaccines for many countries and not just in our country, we are in constant contact with the relevant authorities to ensure that our doses can be released as soon as possible.

Around 1.3 million Pfizer doses have already been distributed and nearly 500,000 administered.

The next 636,000 doses arrive tonight with weekly deliveries of an equivalent volume until end June, when we will receive 2.5 million doses.

Our reliance on the Pfizer vaccine for now has affected the pace at which we are able to open vaccination sites.

Due to the properties of the Pfizer vaccine which requires an ultra-cold supply chain, inclusion of smaller sites and sites in more rural areas is limited.

When the Johnson & Johnson vaccine has been cleared, it will be much easier to administer. It is a single dose vaccine and can be stored in a normal fridge.

While our vaccine rollout ramps up over the coming weeks, I urge everyone to be patient and to await their turn.

It is important that we allow healthcare workers and those above the age of 60 to be vaccinated first, as they are most at risk of severe illness or hospitalisation.

For the time being, only these two groups are eligible to receive a vaccination until the next priority groups are announced.

I would like to thank all of our social partners, including the private sector, labour, community organisations, religious groups and traditional leaders, for coming up with innovative ways to support this drive.

As the African continent we are pushing ahead with efforts to expand our vaccine manufacturing capacity with a view to be self-sufficient in vaccine production.

We are also part of the global effort to ensure that all countries have access to sufficient vaccines as a matter of urgency.

We are continuing to urge all countries to support a waiver of the TRIPS agreement at the World Trade Organisation so that COVID-19 vaccines and treatments can be produced on a greater scale, at lower cost and at a faster pace.

Just as our response to the pandemic has depended on all of us acting together, the vaccine rollout requires a whole-of-society effort to succeed.

Right now, our foremost priority is to scale up our vaccination campaign to reach as many people as possible, as quickly as possible, in every part of our country.

However, we need to delay the increase in infections for as long as we can to allow more of our most vulnerable citizens to be protected.

Every week that we delay the peak of the third wave allows us to vaccinate hundreds of thousands more people, and may well save their lives.

This is why it is crucial for us to act now, and to act together, to limit the spread of the virus by wearing a mask, avoiding gatherings and indoor spaces, keeping a distance from others and washing or sanitising our hands regularly.

With the acceleration of the vaccine programme, we are getting ever closer to overcoming the pandemic.

We cannot give up now. We cannot let down our guard.

It is up to each and every one of us to protect ourselves, our families and our communities until we are all vaccinated.

I ask you to summon your strength, your courage, and your tenacity as South Africans to stand together and to hold back this third wave.

We can and we will succeed, as we have succeeded before. God bless South Africa and protect her people.

I thank you.

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