

Statement by President Cyril Ramaphosa on the termination of the National State of Disaster in response to the Covid-19 pandemic

My Fellow South Africans,

For the past 750 days, South Africa has been in a National State of Disaster.

This is an extraordinary situation that is unprecedented in our country's history.

The declaration of a state of disaster was a response to a global health crisis that posed a grave threat to the lives and the well-being of our people.

There is no doubt that such a response was necessary under these circumstances.

The declaration of the National State of Disaster on 15 March 2020 empowered government to take the measures that prevented many more people from becoming severely ill and saved countless lives.

These measures were effective in slowing down the rate of infection, easing pressure on our hospitals, and providing the time we needed to develop the infrastructure, resources and capacity to manage a large number of people who became ill as a result of COVID-19.

The National State of Disaster also provided the legal basis for the introduction of the special R350 Social Relief of Distress Grant, which continues to bring much needed relief to those most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

It enabled the establishment of the COVID TERS scheme, which provided wage support to millions of workers.

The National State of Disaster also enabled the provision of relief to small businesses, the extension of the validity of vehicle and drivers' licences, and the management of the pandemic in educational institutions, among other things.

All these measures were necessary not only to respond to the devastating effects of the pandemic on human health, but also to limit the great cost to society and the economy.

This is precisely the purpose for which a state of disaster is intended: to enable an effective disaster response that saves lives.

However, in the context of a free and open democratic society, the additional powers that a state of disaster provides are temporary and limited.

They should be maintained only as long as they are absolutely necessary.

As I said in the State of the Nation Address, we have now entered a new phase in the COVID-19 pandemic.

The changing nature of the pandemic in our country was most evident in the fourth wave of the pandemic in December and January.

Although we recorded a far higher number of infections in the fourth wave than in each of the previous waves, there were relatively fewer cases of severe illness, hospitalisation and death.

During the third wave in July last year, the highest average daily number of COVID-related deaths recorded was 420.

In the fourth wave, in February this year, the highest daily number of COVID-related deaths was 240.

In the past week, this number has dropped to just 12.

We are seeing a similar pattern in our health facilities.

Of the 108,000 regular beds in the country, only 1,805 are currently occupied by COVID-19 patients.

Of the 5,600 ICU beds in the country, only 175 are occupied by COVID-19 patients.

This is part of a downward trend that is enabling us to return to normality in public health facilities.

This shows that while the virus continues to circulate, it is not causing the same levels of severe illness that requires hospitalisation or the same number of deaths.

While the pandemic is not over, and while the virus remains among us, these conditions no longer require that we remain in a National State of Disaster.

Going forward, the pandemic will be managed in terms of the National Health Act.

The draft Health Regulations have been published for public comment.

Once the period for public comment closes on the 16th of April 2022 and the comments have been considered, the new regulations will be finalised and promulgated.

Since the requirements for a National State of Disaster to be declared in terms of the Disaster Management Act are no longer met, Cabinet has decided to terminate the National State of Disaster with effect from midnight tonight.

The Disaster Management Act provides that certain elements of the regulations may remain in place for a limited period for 'post-disaster recovery and rehabilitation'.

Accordingly certain transitional provisions will remain in place for a period of 30 days after the termination of the National State of Disaster to ensure essential public health

precautions and other necessary services are not interrupted while the new regulations in terms of the National Health Act come into effect.

What this means is that all regulations and directions made in terms of the Disaster Management Act following the declaration of the national state of disaster in response to COVID-19 are repealed with effect from midnight tonight, with the exception of a few transitional measures.

These transitional measures, which will automatically lapse after 30 days, are the following:

Firstly, we will still be required to wear a face mask in an indoor public space. This is necessary to prevent transmission in high-risk places, especially while many people remain unvaccinated.

A mask is not required when outdoors.

Secondly, the existing restrictions on gatherings will continue as a transitional measure.

This means that both indoor and outdoor venues can take up to 50 percent of their capacity without any maximum limit, provided that proof of vaccination or a COVID test not older than 72 hours is required for entrance to the venue.

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

Thirdly, the existing provisions with respect to international travel remain in place.

This means that travellers entering South Africa will need to show proof of vaccination or a negative PCR test not older than 72 hours.

If a traveller does not submit a vaccine certificate or proof of a negative COVID-19 test, they will be required to do an antigen test on arrival.

If they test positive for COVID-19, they will need to isolate for 10 days.

Fourthly, the directions that provide for the payment of the special R350 Social Relief of Distress Grant will remain in place.

This will enable the Department of Social Development to finalise the regulations that will allow the payment of the grant to continue.

Fifthly, directions that provide for the extension of the validity of a learner's licence, driving licence card, licence disc, professional driving permit and registration of a motor vehicle will remain in place.

All other disaster regulations will fall away at midnight tonight.

These include regulations on isolation of persons, on schools and access to old age homes, on public transport, on initiation practices, on cargo transportation, and on criminalisation of non-adherence to these rules.

The end of the National State of Disaster also means that the Coronavirus Alert Levels will no longer apply.

The few transitional measures that remain are limited in scope, and allow almost all social and economic activity to resume as normal.

They are essential to reduce the risk of a further COVID-19 wave and further disaster.

They also ensure that people can continue to receive their special R350 Social Relief of Distress Grant and that there is no interruption regarding drivers' licences.

As I have explained, these are transitional measures which will lapse after 30 days.

This will allow the management of the pandemic to be dealt with, as appropriate, by the Health Regulations or other provisions.

There is one last measure that will outlive the National State of Disaster.

This is the COVID-19 Vaccine Injury No-Fault Compensation Scheme.

This Scheme was brought into force in April last year to provide quick and easy access to compensation to any person who suffers a serious injury because of receiving a COVID-19 vaccine.

The COVID-19 Vaccine Injury No-Fault Compensation Scheme, which is administered by the Department of Health, will continue after the National State of Disaster ends.

The Scheme will only be terminated once it has achieved its purpose.

Fellow South Africans,

The end of the National State of Disaster is an important milestone in our fight against the pandemic.

It is a sign of the progress we have made together and a reminder of what our nation has endured.

It is a moment to remember those who have lost their lives and the many people who are still struggling with the effects of the disease.

It is also a time to pay tribute to the health care workers, police, soldiers, volunteers and other frontline workers for their dedication and service during the worst times of the pandemic.

The end of the National State of Disaster is a firm statement of our determination to live our lives and rebuild our country even as this virus remains in our midst.

It should give all of us the confidence to return to the lives we led before the pandemic, with a few simple adjustments to protect those around us.

It should provide our businesses with certainty that they can operate and invest without the prospect of further restrictions.

Importantly, by ending the National State of Disaster we are each taking more individual responsibility for protecting our health and the health of others.

Our greatest responsibility is to make sure that we are vaccinated against COVID-19 and to encourage others to get vaccinated.

Vaccination is our best defence against COVID-19.

Vaccination is also the best weapon we have to reduce the chances of future waves of infection that overwhelm our health facilities – and that may require that we once more declare a state of disaster.

We must, however, remain cautious and ever vigilant.

We have learnt that this virus is unpredictable, and that the situation can change rapidly.

Therefore, we are continuing to work with the World Health Organisation and other bodies to understand the increase of cases in other parts of the world and to assess the relevant emerging scientific information.

Since this virus first arrived on our shores two years ago, we have acted together, with purpose and resolve, to overcome the pandemic.

Although the pandemic is not over, and although we continue to remain cautious, we can be confident that we are in a better position now than we have been at any other time over the last 750 days.

We are hopeful that the worst is behind us, and we are confident that there are only better days ahead.

Now is the time to grow our economy and create jobs.

Now is the time to get our country back on track.

Now is the time to heal, to recover and to rebuild.

I thank you.