



**STATEMENT BY PRESIDENT CYRIL RAMAPHOSA ON PROGRESS IN THE
NATIONAL EFFORT TO CONTAIN THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

UNION BUILDINGS, TSHWANE

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Fellow South Africans,

Our former President Nelson Mandela once wrote:

“I have walked that long road to freedom. I have tried not to falter; I have made missteps along the way.

“But I have discovered the secret that after climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are many more hills to climb”.

As a country, we have faced two devastating waves of coronavirus infections.

We have overcome these by responding swiftly and decisively, and by acting together to contain the spread of the virus and protect ourselves, our families and our communities.

We now face another great challenge, another hill to climb.

Twelve days ago, I addressed you to warn that a new and deadly third wave of infections had begun in a number of our provinces, and was spreading.

The average number of daily new infections was more than doubling, hospital admissions were rising, and deaths from COVID-19 were increasing by nearly 50 per cent.

As I address you this evening, the situation has gotten worse.

Along with many other countries in Africa, South Africa is seeing a massive resurgence of infections.

The Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention reports that a third wave of the disease is underway on the continent.

To date, African Union Member States have reported over 5.2 million cases and over 138,000 deaths from COVID-19.

The COVID-19 virus that descended on our country in March last year has been continuing to mutate, creating new variants.

Our scientists tell us that COVID-19 virus has many variants.

Last year, we experienced the Beta variant.

In addition, we now have the Delta variant.

This variant was first detected in India at the end of March this year, and is now found in 85 countries.

The Delta variant spread like wildfire in India in an alarming manner.

The Delta variant has now been detected in five of our provinces, namely the Eastern Cape, Free State, Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal and Western Cape.

The evidence we have is that the Delta variant is rapidly displacing the Beta variant, which has been dominant in our country until now.

We are concerned about the rapid spread of this variant.

Firstly, because it is more transmissible than previously circulating viruses, meaning it is easier to catch through person-to-person contact.

It is thought to be twice as contagious as the Beta variant.

Secondly, because it is more contagious, it can infect far more people.

As with the previous variants, you can pass it on without even knowing you have it.

Thirdly, there is now emerging scientific evidence that people previously infected with the Beta variant do not have full protection against the Delta variant, and may get re-infected.

Fourthly, because it is much more contagious, the measures we have so far adopted to contain the spread of the virus may no longer be sufficient to reduce transmission.

There is also much we do not know about this variant.

For example, it is not clear that it causes more severe symptoms.

Preliminary data from other countries suggests that it is not more severe.

Reports from some countries, including on our continent, also suggest that infections and clinical illness in children may be more common with the delta variant, even as the overall rate of infection remains substantially lower than in adults.

The rapid spread of this variant is extremely serious.

Even if it is not more severe, the rate at which people are infected could lead to many more people becoming ill and requiring treatment at the same time.

We need to take extra precautions.

As of today, the 7-day average of new daily cases nationally has overtaken the peak of the first wave in July last year, and will soon overtake the peak of the second wave we experienced in January this year.

Gauteng now accounts for more than 60 per cent of new cases in the country.

With the exceptions of the Northern Cape and Free State, infections are rising rapidly in all other provinces.

We also must remain vigilant in the Northern Cape and Free State, which may experience a second spike of cases if the new variant spreads there as well.

We must all be worried about what we are seeing unfold before our very eyes.

Every one of us has a friend, a family member or a colleague who has been infected.

There are few in our country who have not had to bury a family member, a friend or a loved one who lost their lives to this disease.

We are in the grip of a devastating wave that by all indications seems like it will be worse than those that preceded it.

The peak of this third wave looks set to be higher than the previous two.

The 1st wave lasted 15 weeks. The 2nd wave lasted 9 weeks.

We don't know how long this one will last, but indications are that it could last longer.

I know that is the last thing many of you want to hear.

We have all had to endure great hardship over the past year and a half.

We may have thought that with life slowly returning to normal, we could take a more casual approach to the public health regulations.

Perhaps we are fed up with wearing a mask on public transport and decide to keep it off one day. When we see nobody objects or complains, we stop wearing it.

We go to social gatherings with a mask on, but take it off once we are inside.

When we meet our friends and loved ones we hug, kiss and shake hands, believing ourselves and them to be safe.

We continue to accept invitations to social gatherings and parties, and host our own.

The difficult truth is that complacency comes at a high price.

We must maintain our guard and continue to be careful at all times.

We must follow the public health regulations that are there for our own safety and the safety of others.

Safeguarding the capacity of our health facilities to cope with rising infections is a priority.

In several provinces, our public health facilities are stretched to their limits, and private facilities are also buckling under the strain.

Even as our hospitals have made extraordinary efforts to accommodate patients, ICU beds are in short supply.

What we are seeing is that the existing containment measures in place are not enough to cope with the speed and scale of new infections.

In considering what new measures we have to take we have drawn on international best practice and scientific data from studies across the world.

Our priority is to break the chain of transmission by reducing person-to-person contact and thereby help to flatten the curve.

Based on scientific advice we received from the Ministerial Advisory Committee and further consultation with our provinces and metros and traditional leaders, and on the recommendation of the National Coronavirus Command Council, Cabinet has decided that the country should move to Adjusted Alert Level 4.

Cabinet decided that to ensure that our response is appropriate and proportionate to the current situation, the additional restrictions we are announcing this evening will be in place for the next 14 days.

We will assess the impact of these interventions after 14 days to determine whether they need to be maintained or adjusted.

Therefore, the following measures are to be in place across the country from tomorrow, Monday, the 28th of June 2021 to Sunday, the 11th of July 2021:

- All gatherings – whether indoors or outdoors – are prohibited. These include religious, political, cultural and social gatherings.
- Funerals and cremations are permitted, but attendance may not exceed 50 people and all social distancing and health protocols must be observed.
- Night vigils, after-funeral gatherings and ‘after-tears’ gatherings are not allowed.
- Public spaces, such as beaches and parks, will remain open. However, no gatherings will be permitted.

- A curfew will be in place from 9pm to 4am, and all non-essential establishments will need to close by 8pm.
- The sale of alcohol both for on-site and off-site consumption is prohibited.

Our Ministerial Advisory Committee has advised that the limited restrictions previously imposed were not that effective and that a prohibition will ease the pressure that is placed on hospital services by alcohol-related emergency incidents.

- Because of the burden of infections in Gauteng, travel in and out of the province for leisure purposes will be prohibited. This does not include work, business or commercial travel, transit through airports or for the transport of goods.

If you are currently not in your place of residence, you will be allowed to return home to or from Gauteng.

- Visits to old age homes, care facilities and other 'congregant settings' will be restricted.
- Restaurants and other eateries will only be permitted to sell food for take-away or delivery. This is because it is not possible for patrons to wear masks while eating or drinking in these establishments.

The closure of schools and other educational institutions for the winter holidays will be brought forward.

Schools will start closing from this Wednesday, the 30th of June, and all schools will be expected to be closed by the end of the week, on Friday.

Contact classes at tertiary institutions will end by Wednesday, the 30th of June, with limited access to the institutions.

Residences will however remain open.

The Ministers of Basic Education and Higher Education, Science and Innovation will provide further details on these arrangements.

The measures that we are putting in place now are designed to allow as much economic activity to continue as possible, while containing the spread of the virus.

Most businesses will continue to operate at full capacity and should not be affected.

Our focus is on limiting social contacts while preserving the economy.

I want to emphasise that it remains mandatory for every person to wear a face mask that always covers their nose and mouth 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.

All employers must allow their staff to work from home wherever possible, and should postpone all non-essential travel and workplace gatherings.

Government will also be putting in place measures to reduce physical attendance of its employees at workplaces while limiting the disruption of government activities and services.

As we implement these restrictions, we are continuing to work to strengthen the capacity of our health system.

In Gauteng, the loss of significant capacity due to the ongoing closure of the Charlotte Maxeke Hospital is adding strain to other hospitals.

We are doing everything we can to provide additional bed capacity and speed up the re-opening of Charlotte Maxeke hospital.

At present, Gauteng has made available 830 additional beds by postponing elective surgery and another 400 beds constructed with alternative building technology that are now being activated.

We have been engaging with the producers of medical oxygen to increase their production to accommodate the anticipated increase in cases.

We are constantly monitoring PPE stocks and medicine stock availability so that we can intervene where we see declines in stock levels.

The Gauteng Department of Health is recruiting additional human resources to support increased workload.

The Solidarity Fund has provided R16 million to support the recruitment and placement of additional nurses in Gauteng hospitals to complement the military health team that has been deployed.

To ensure there is sufficient hospital bed space we have to reprioritise service provision to ensure there is capacity to treat those with severe cases of COVID-19.

We are forging ahead with our rapidly expanding national vaccination programme.

The programme has picked up significant momentum with key milestones being achieved as we move forward.

As of midnight yesterday, nearly 2.7 million people in South Africa had received a vaccine dose.

In the last week, the daily vaccination rate surpassed 100,000.

In the last three days, we have received an additional 1.2 million doses of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine and 1.4 million doses of the Pfizer vaccine through the COVAX facility.

With these additional supplies, we will be able to rapidly increase the rate of vaccination this week and in the weeks that follow.

In line with our national roll-out plan, over 950,000 health care workers have now been vaccinated across the country and the registration and vaccination of this cohort continues.

The second phase of our roll out has also gone well with the drive for the registration and vaccination of the over 60 year old group continuing to yield good results.

Whilst we have yet to reach all of the estimated 5 million citizens in this group, each province has now embarked on social mobilisation drives to assist our elderly to register and receive their vaccination.

To date 3.8 million people have been registered on the electronic vaccination database.

The national vaccination programme will continue along three defined streams.

The first stream is the general population according to age groups.

The next cohort of 50 to 59 year olds can begin registration on the 1st of July and vaccination of this group will begin on the 15th of July.

The second stream has already commenced with people working in the basic education sector, with 184,000 vaccinations recorded to date.

The third stream is focusing on police and other security personnel.

We will start to vaccinate this group on the 5th of July.

The fourth stream is through workplace programmes in key economic sectors such as mining, manufacturing and the taxi industry.

I want to call on all who are eligible to register for a vaccine whether it is online, via SMS, by phone, or in person.

We will continue to work with our social partners and communities to reach as many people as possible as quickly as we can.

Fellow South Africans,

There is still a lot of misinformation being circulated about the COVID-19 vaccine.

False stories are being spread on WhatsApp groups, on social media, and by word of mouth about the COVID-19 vaccine, claiming that the vaccine is not safe, that it can make you sick, or that it doesn't work.

I have said it before, and I wish to say it again: please think long and hard before you press share or send.

Please consider the harm you may be causing.

You are spreading panic, fear and confusion at a time when we can ill-afford it.

The scientific evidence before us shows that vaccines work. They are safe. They are effective, and they save lives.

If you have any questions about the vaccine, if you are unsure in any way, please consult the information being provided by the Department of Health and from doctors.

You may also have questions as to whether the vaccines currently being used are effective in preventing severe illness or hospitalisation from the new variant.

There is evidence that the vaccines we are using in South Africa are effective against the delta variant.

The Vaccine Ministerial Advisory Committee will continue to consider all data at its disposal and will adapt its advice as and when new evidence emerges.

We must also remember that some vaccinated people may still become infected, regardless of variant, because no vaccine is 100% effective.

Where vaccinated people do get infected, the symptoms tend to be mild.

The most important thing is that any of the vaccines we are rolling out will protect you against severe disease, hospitalisation and, most importantly, death.

I also want to remind the South African people that we must continue to follow the public health guidelines even if we are vaccinated.

Throughout this pandemic, our national response has been led by dedicated medical professionals, healthcare workers and scientists.

We owe them all a debt of gratitude for their professionalism and their dedication.

It is therefore extremely distressing when political leaders launch personal attacks against such people for doing the job they have been assigned to do.

We must remember that SAHPRA is an independent regulator that focuses only on scientific evidence to ensure safety, quality and efficacy in the interest of public health.

SAHPRA must be allowed to do its job without intimidation or political influence so that when vaccines are approved the public can be confident that the vaccines are safe, of good quality and will work.

Fellow South Africans,

Since our country reported its first case of this deadly virus, we have understood that we are all in this together.

As much as we had hoped this pandemic would pass quickly, we know the reality to be vastly different.

There may be uncertainty over the trajectory of the pandemic, but there is one thing that is certain.

We can and we must continue to protect ourselves in the best way we know how.

The tried and tested public health measures that have been in place remain our best chance at fighting this pandemic.

They are not complicated, difficult or expensive.

Whatever inconvenience they may be to us, they are certainly better than becoming seriously ill and needing hospitalisation.

We must always wear a mask in public.

We must regularly wash or sanitise our hands.

We must always keep a safe distance from others.

Unless it is necessary, please remain at home.

If you are sick and have even mild COVID-19 symptoms, you must isolate yourself, including from your immediate household.

If you have been exposed to someone infected with COVID-19 you have to quarantine for ten days.

If you test positive, notify the people you have come into contact with so they can protect themselves and others.

We are all responsible not just for our own health, but for the health of those around us.

While this pandemic may seem overwhelming, we can do something about it.

Through the choices we make, we can help to contain it.

We have come so far. We have weathered this storm for nearly a year and a half.

We have overcome many hurdles and setbacks.

We are still standing, because we are a resilient people that has overcome the worst many times in our history.

Now a third wave is gathering in strength and force.

Once again, we find ourselves at a defining moment in our fight against this disease.

Let us call on every bit of strength we have, let us summon our reserves of courage, and hold firm until this wave, too, passes over us.

We will recover.

We have climbed many hills before, and we will climb this one too.

We will do so by working together, as we have always done.

I say so because I believe in you, the South African people.

I know that you will continue to do what is right and what needs to be done.

And I know that no matter how difficult things become, we never, never give up.

May God bless South Africa and protect her people.

I thank you.

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