

STATEMENT BY PRESIDENT CYRIL RAMAPHOSA ON PROGRESS IN THE NATIONAL EFFORT TO
CONTAIN THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC, 30 MARCH 2021

Fellow South Africans,
Good Evening,

We decided to delay the start of this address to the nation by half an hour because a legend of South African broadcasting, Ms Noxolo Grootboom, presented her last isiXhosa bulletin at 7pm on SABC News this evening.

I wish to pay tribute to Ms Grootboom as an outstanding journalist who, throughout her distinguished career, brought historic events in our country and across the world into the living rooms of our nation.

We wish Ms Grootboom well, and thank her for her many years of service.

Sifuna ukuthi, kumakhaya ngamakhaya, Siyakuthanda.

It is now just over a year since we declared a National State of Disaster in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and had to introduce measures to contain its spread.

Since then, we all had to put up with restrictions on nearly every aspect of our lives.

What has perhaps been most difficult of all is how the pandemic has affected the social interactions that make us feel part of a community.

We miss the many things we once took for granted, like being able to visit our loved ones, to go to a party, or to attend religious services.

One year later, we have made significant progress in bringing the pandemic under control.

The tireless efforts of our healthcare workers have saved many thousands of lives, and the pioneering work of our scientific community has led to significant advances in our understanding of the virus.

Through the changes that we have all made to our personal behaviour, we have protected ourselves, our families and our communities.

In South Africa, as in most countries around the world, we are not yet ready to return to normal life.

For the second year in a row, we will again have to limit our interactions, particularly during the Easter period.

This is so because we are still in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic.

Over the last year, the country has recorded more than 1.5 million cases of the coronavirus.

And there have been more than 52,000 recorded deaths from COVID-19.

We remember and mourn each of these lives that have been lost.

As I reported when I last addressed you, South Africa has emerged from a second wave of infections.

For the past two weeks, the number of new cases has remained relatively stable at around 1,200 new cases per day.

The number of hospitalisations is declining, as is the number of deaths.

Our national recovery rate stands at slightly higher than 95%.

This is thanks to the collective efforts of all South Africans who have abided by the restrictions that have been in place since March last year to protect lives.

It is also a testament to the high degree of vigilance we have continued to observe as a country with regards to monitoring, testing, contact tracing and preventive measures.

At the same time, our national vaccination programme has commenced and will be gaining momentum.

In the middle of February, we began Phase 1 of our vaccination programme, which involves the vaccination of health workers.

This phase is on track to be completed within three months.

More than 250,000 health workers have to date received the Johnson & Johnson vaccine as part of the Sisonke trial.

We have secured 11 million doses of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine, which we know to be effective against the dominant variants in our country.

We have secured a further 20 million doses and are finalising the agreement with Johnson & Johnson.

We are also finalising an agreement for 20 million doses of the Pfizer vaccine, which requires two doses.

Together, this supply of vaccines will provide us with enough doses to vaccinate 41 million people.

We will make further announcements once these negotiations have been concluded.

We are also in various stages of negotiations with the manufacturers of other vaccines such as Sinovac, Sinopharm and Sputnik V. Some of these manufacturers in the final stages of the approval process for use of the vaccines in South Africa.

In addition to the vaccine doses, we will receive directly through our agreements with manufacturers, we will also receive an allocation of vaccine doses through the African Union initiative that we established when we held the Chairshop of the African Union.

Although there have been delays in securing vaccine supplies, we are still confident in achieving our vaccination targets.

The demand for vaccines around the world has become extremely competitive but we are doing our best to secure enough supply the people of South Africa and the African continent.

We have had to adapt to the changing nature of the virus and to emerging evidence about the effectiveness of different vaccines.

We will ensure that we have sufficient doses of effective vaccines to reach population immunity in the shortest possible time.

Phase 2 is scheduled to start in mid-May.

We believe that sufficient volumes from manufacturers will be arriving in the quantities as agreed in terms of our agreements with them.

Under Phase 2 we hope to vaccinate more of our people over six months.

In line with international best practice, we will be prioritising those at the highest risk of hospitalisation and death, such as people over 60 and people living with co-morbidities.

The second phase of the COVID-19 vaccination programme aims to ensure that we will protect our communities, prevent health services from being overwhelmed and reduce the need for lockdowns that seriously disrupt education, the economy and each one of our lives.

Registration to be vaccinated is scheduled to start in April.

People will be encouraged to register on-line, but those without on-line access will be able to register in person.

To ensure that we have supporting infrastructure over 2,000 vaccination sites have been identified across the country.

These include general practitioners' rooms, community clinics and pharmacies, retail outlets and in some instances, larger facilities like stadiums and conference centres.

An Electronic Vaccination Data System has been established to manage the vaccine rollout and direct people towards vaccination sites closest to where they live.

This system will allow you to register, receive an appointment date and site, and receive a digital certificate or a hard copy confirming your vaccination status once vaccinated.

Everyone that will be vaccinated will have to be registered on the system first, and you will be invited to register once you become eligible.

We will work through provincial and district structures and community-based organisations to register those citizens who do not have access to technology.

We are developing mechanisms to identify and register undocumented persons so that they too can be vaccinated.

We remain committed to keeping the nation informed on every step in the vaccine rollout process.

Yesterday, the Deputy President and I visited the Aspen manufacturing plant in the Eastern Cape, which will be involved in producing the Johnson & Johnson vaccines.

This is a world-class vaccine manufacturing facility which rates amongst the best in the world.

This is a great achievement for South Africa, demonstrating our capabilities in advanced manufacturing.

I wish to commend Aspen for having had the foresight to invest in this facility and for the speed with which they have gotten ready to begin production.

More than half of the capacity of the plant – which can produce 300 million doses a year – has been committed to Africa.

Earlier this week, the African Vaccine Acquisition Trust signed a procurement agreement on behalf of African Union member states for 220 million doses of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine.

It has an option for an additional 180 million doses.

This agreement is significant for Africa, not only because it gives effect to our determination that no country should be left behind, but also because these vaccines will be produced right here on our continent.

Greater collaboration between government, business, labour and civil society is key to the success of the vaccine rollout.

The private sector continues to play a key supporting role in the national effort.

We are particularly encouraged by the commitment of the private healthcare sector to work with government to make the vaccine rollout a success, drawing on the immense capabilities that we have developed in the sector.

We are also grateful to numerous companies working through the Solidarity Fund to lend financial resources to the vaccine acquisition and rollout.

We commend the Vodacom Group and Vodafone Foundation, which have pledged R87 million in the African countries in which they operate for cold chain storage and logistics so that Covid-19 vaccines are delivered securely.

In addition, Vodacom will be deploying a state-of-the-art vaccine management platform across the AU member states, following a successful roll-out of the same platform in South Africa.

I want to call on all our private sector partners to support this new phase in our fight against the pandemic.

Fellow South Africans,

In just a few days, the country will begin the annual Easter break.

For many, this will be a welcome moment to pause and rest, whether from work or from our studies, and from the pressures of the last months.

Many of us have made plans for the upcoming long weekend.

Some of us will be heading out of town; others will be visiting friends and family.

Many of us will be attending gatherings and celebrations.

For millions of people, this is also a time of religious observance.

While the rate of transmission remains stable, we cannot let our guard down.

This is a time when caution is needed more than ever.

The reality is that greater movement of people, interprovincial travel, greater use of public transit and gatherings present a great risk of an increase in infections.

Over the last few days, we have sought the advice of experts and consulted with representatives of provincial and local government and traditional leaders on what measures should be put in place over the coming long weekend to prevent a new outbreak of infections.

We have considered several factors, including presentations by the religious community on precautionary measures they have put in place for the anticipated gatherings.

Given the relatively low transmission levels, we have decided to keep the country on coronavirus Alert Level 1.

However, due to the specific circumstances of this period, we need to make a few adjustments.

Some of the measures that will remain unchanged are as follows:

The curfew is maintained from midnight to 4am.

Public recreational spaces such as beaches, parks and dams will remain open.

However, this will continue to be subject to strict health protocols, such as social distancing, mask-wearing.

Funerals remain restricted to a maximum of 100 people and with a two-hour limit on services.

Interprovincial travel will still be permitted.

However, I urge all South Africans to limit their travel as much as possible and to observe all the necessary health protocols if they cannot avoid travelling.

However, given the role of alcohol in fuelling reckless behaviour, we will put in place some restrictions over the Easter weekend.

To this end, the sale of alcohol for off-site consumption will be prohibited this coming Friday, Saturday, Sunday and Monday.

On-site sales at restaurants, shebeens and bars will be allowed, according to licensing conditions, up until 23:00.

Fellow South Africans,

The Easter weekend is a time of spiritual significance, and attending religious services is important to millions of people.

For Christians, congregational worship is an important part of celebrating Easter.

The Jewish community is currently celebrating Passover, and the Muslim community will soon be starting the Holy month of Ramadan.

In recent weeks, we have held consultations with faith communities to find mutually beneficial solutions to the challenges of managing large crowds at religious services.

Following this consultation, it has been determined that religious gatherings over this period will be restricted to a total number of 250 people indoors and 500 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.

Congregants should not gather outside their usual places of worship, and people must go home and not sleep over after services.

I want to express my gratitude to the leadership of the faith community who have engaged positively with us as government.

There is a common appreciation that we must do all we can to support our people to exercise their religious freedom and keep our country safe.

With respect to other gatherings, these will also be restricted to a maximum number of 250 people indoors and 500 outdoors.

As before, 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.

We continue to urge all South Africans to avoid gatherings if they are in a vulnerable group, such as the elderly and those with co-morbidities.

We also urge that gatherings should take place in outdoor venues, which are significantly safer than gathering indoors.

We will review these measures on the size of gatherings within the next 15 days based on an assessment on the state of the pandemic and the extent of compliance with health protocols.

We continue to follow the principle that restrictions should not be more severe than is necessary to contain the spread of the virus.

We continue to be guided by data on the epidemiological situation and by expert advice and wide consultations with social partners.

We will closely monitor the situation and will respond swiftly to any signs of a resurgence.

Fellow South Africans,

This pandemic is still very much with us.

We must act with caution, not just this coming weekend but in the days, weeks and months ahead.

We do not know when the coronavirus pandemic will be behind us, but we all know what must be done.

We know that wearing a mask in public at all times, regularly washing or sanitising our hands, observing social distancing and avoiding crowds are still the most effective way of keeping the virus at bay.

Any action that puts ourselves or others at risk must be avoided.

The restrictions that are in place for our collective health and safety must be observed.

Let us be a responsible nation that is forever aware of the presence of the virus.

Let us remain at home or in small groups.

Let us avoid being in large crowds and places with poor ventilation.

Let us not go to funerals unless we are immediate family and not visit the homes of the bereaved.

We all have a role in this great national effort to end COVID-19.

Let us play our part.

At this time, when the Easter message of hope, rebirth and renewal finds expression in the lives of so many of us, let us please take care.

May God continue to bless South Africa and protect her people.

I thank you.

ISSUED BY THE PRESIDENCY OF THE REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA