

Covid-19 declared national disaster

President Cyril Ramaphosa has declared the coronavirus pandemic a national disaster, and announced a raft of interventions to curb the spread of the disease in South Africa, including closing schools and extending the school holidays, closing 35 ports of entry and imposing a travel ban on foreign nationals from countries with the highest rates of infection.



President Cyril Ramaphosa

The measures were the outcome of an emergency Cabinet meeting held on Sunday in Pretoria, and Ramaphosa said the interventions were aimed at protecting South African citizens and the economy and reducing the impact of what he said was a medical emergency far graver than what has been experienced in over a century.

The number of positive cases of Covid-19 in the country has risen to 61, an increase of 10 from the figure released earlier in the day by the Department of Health. Globally, 162 000 people have tested positive for coronavirus and around 5 000 people have died.

“This number is expected to rise in the coming days and weeks. Initially it was people who had travelled into the country, especially from Italy. It is concerning that we are now dealing with internal transmission of the virus,” he said.

The situation, the President said, called for an extraordinary response and no half measures.

During the Cabinet meeting, the virus was declared a national disaster to enable government to have an integrated and

coordinated disaster mechanism that will focus on preventing and reducing the outbreak.

During this period, there should be limited contact between people who may be infected and South Africans.

Limiting travel

The travel ban will be imposed from 18 March on foreign citizens who come from Italy, Iran, South Korea, Spain, Germany, United States, Germany, United Kingdom and China. "We have cancelled visas to visitors from those countries from today. Previously granted visas have been revoked," he said.

South Africans have been advised to refrain from all forms of travel to or through the European Union, the US, UK and other high risk areas. "This is effective immediately," he said.

Additionally, any foreign national who has visited any of the high risk countries in the past 20 days will be denied a visa. South African citizens returning from these countries will be subjected to testing and self-isolation or quarantine on return.

"Travellers from medium risk countries such as Portugal, Hong Kong and Singapore will be required to undergo high intensity screening. All travellers who have entered South Africa from high-risk countries since mid-February will be required to undergo testing.

"We will strengthen screening and testing measures at the OR Tambo, Cape Town and King Shaka International Airports."

Of the country's 53 land ports of entry, the president announced that 35 will be shut down as of Monday. Two of the eight sea ports will be shut down too, for passengers and crew changing.

Effective immediately, all non-essential travel for all spheres of government outside of the country is prohibited.

Government has also discouraged all non-essential domestic travel, particularly by air, rail, taxis and bus.

Limited contact

"... It is essential therefore that we minimise the risk of the spread of this virus by limiting contact amongst groups of people," he said.

"While we appreciate the economic, religious, and cultural significance of social and community gatherings, the coronavirus is spread through contact between persons."

The president called for social distancing said therefore gatherings of more than 100 people will be prohibited.

"Mass celebrations of upcoming national days such as Human Rights Day and other large government events will be cancelled. Where small gatherings are unavoidable, organisers will need to put in place stringent measures of prevention and control.

"Schools will be closed from Wednesday, 18 March, and will remain closed until after the Easter weekend. To compensate for this, mid-year school holidays will be shortened by a week.

Government is working closely with colleges, universities and other public facilities such as Parliament, prisons, police stations and military installations to intensify hygiene control.

Addressing reporters, the president also announced that visits to correctional centres have been suspended for 30 days from Sunday.

Measures and responses around institutes of higher learning are expected to be announced by the relevant minister in due course and following consultations. The University of Cape Town has subsequently announced that it will be closed from today, after a staff member tested positive for the disease.

Ramaphosa also urged businesses to ensure necessary measures to intensify hygiene control.

“We also call on the management of malls, entertainment centres and other places frequented by large numbers of people to bolster their hygiene control,” he said.

Quarantine sites

To further boost the country’s health response, the president said, government is strengthening its surveillance and testing systems and is in the process of identifying isolation and quarantine sites in each district and metro.

“We are calling for a change of behaviour amongst all South Africans. We must minimise physical contact with other people and encourage the elbow greeting rather than shaking hands,” the President said.

Because of the severity of this virus and its rapid spreading, government will make funding available to capacitate the sectors dealing with the national response to the Coronavirus outbreak.

National Command Council

Ramaphosa announced that he will be chairing a National Command Council that will include, among others, members of the Inter-Ministerial Committee.

They will meet three times a week, to coordinate all aspects of an extraordinary emergency response.

The president said the pandemic is anticipated to have dire effects on the country’s already waning economy. A dramatic decline in economic activity in major trading partners, a sudden drop in international tourism and severe instability across all global markets have already been recorded.

“This will have a potentially severe impact on production, the viability of businesses, job retention and job creation,” he said.

To soften the blow, Cabinet is in the process of finalising a comprehensive package of interventions to mitigate the expected impact of Covid-19 on the economy.

It is expected to consist of various fiscal and other measures that will be concluded following consultations.

Keeping South Africans safe

The president said government’s priority was to safeguard the health and well-being of South Africans, minimise infections and to ensure all those infected get proper treatment.

“While we are battling a contagious virus, perhaps the greatest dangers to our country at this time are fear and ignorance,” he said.

Despite the extent of the threat that this disease presents, the country should not be overwhelmed by fear and panic.

“This epidemic will pass. But it is up to us to determine how long it will last, how damaging it will be, and how long it will take our economy and our country to recover.

“It is true that we are facing a grave emergency. But if we act together, if we act now, and if we act decisively, we will

overcome it,” said Ramaphosa.

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