

President Cyril Ramaphosa: South Africa's response to Coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic

30 Sep 2021

My fellow South Africans,

This evening, I would like to talk to you about four matters that are vital to our fight against the COVID-19 pandemic and the recovery of our society and economy.

These are, firstly, the intensification of our national vaccination campaign; secondly, the measures we will be taking to further open our economy; thirdly, the introduction of a vaccination certificate; and, fourthly, our engagements with the United Kingdom to restore travel, tourism and trade.

A few days ago, the South African COVID-19 Modelling Consortium confirmed that South Africa has emerged from a third wave of COVID-19 infections.

This wave, which was driven by the Delta variant, was far more severe than the previous two waves.

This third wave lasted more than 130 days, and was about two weeks longer than each of the earlier waves.

At the peak of the third wave, we were recording around 20,000 new cases each day. In the last seven days, the average number of new cases was at around 1,800 a day. There are also sustained decreases in COVID-19 hospitalisations and deaths in all provinces. This is news that is welcome to all of us. We have been living under the shadow of the pandemic for 574 days now, and all of us have taken strain.

We have experienced much hardship, and the most difficult of these has been the many relatives, colleagues and friends we have lost to this pandemic. We mourn each and every one of them.

Naturally we all want to resume many of the activities that we have been unable to do for much of the past two years.

We want to attend traditional rituals, birthday parties, weddings and other social functions freely with our friends and family.

We long for a time when we can go to church, to the mosque, to the shul and to the temple without restrictions, and to be able to hug and shake hands without worrying about getting sick.

The sports fans among us cannot wait to return to FNB, to Moses Mabhida, to Royal Bafokeng, to Newlands, and to Loftus to cheer on our teams.

We want to socialise freely again at restaurants, taverns and theatres, and we want to travel freely whenever and wherever we choose.

These freedoms, which we all long for, are within our reach.

But we will only be able to get there if we are all vaccinated and we all continue to observe the basic health protocols.

Since we launched our national vaccination drive, it has been gathering pace. To date we have administered over 17 million vaccine doses.

Over 8.6 million people are fully vaccinated, which is more than one-fifth of the adult population.

Significantly, 60 per cent of South Africans over the age of 60, and 50 per cent of people between the ages of 50 and 59 have now received at least one vaccine dose.

These numbers give us confidence and hope.

We have set ourselves the target of vaccinating 70 per cent of the adult population in South Africa by the end of the year.

If we reach this target, the Department of Health estimates that we could save up to 20,000 lives.

That represents 20,000 people – mothers, fathers, sons and daughters – whose death can be prevented if the majority of us chooses to get vaccinated.

To reach our goal we need to administer an additional 16 million vaccine doses this year, which amounts to around 250,000 first dose vaccinations every single workday of every week until mid- December.

We know that the older you are, the greater the risk that you will get severely ill with COVID-19 or that you will need to be hospitalised.

We also know that the risk of death from COVID-19 is higher among the elderly than younger people.

To save lives and prevent our health facilities and staff from being overwhelmed, we have therefore prioritised those above 50 and those above 60 for vaccination.

This does not mean that people younger than 50 are not at risk.

In recent months, we have seen an increasing number of younger people being hospitalised and dying from COVID-19.

It is for this reason that from the 20th of August we extended our vaccination programme to all people in South Africa over 18 years of age.

While we have made important progress, and secured sufficient vaccine doses for the target population, our vaccination programme is still too slow.

We have therefore decided to upscale our vaccination campaign by launching the ‘Vooma Vaccination Weekends’ campaign from tomorrow.

The Vooma Vaccination Weekends campaign will be a countrywide drive to encourage our people to get vaccinated.

We know that getting to a vaccination site during weekdays can be difficult for many people, especially those who work, who have to commute long distances, or have family responsibilities.

Those who might not be able to get the vaccine during the week should take up this opportunity.

Tomorrow, the 1st of October and on Saturday the 2nd of October, we will be opening vaccination sites around the country to reach over half a million people.

The Department of Health has identified priority districts in each province based on the number of unvaccinated people and the current vaccination coverage in each district.

This will be the first Vooma Vaccination Weekend in a series of outreach programmes.

Leaders from across the political spectrum, civil society, religious leaders, traditional leaders, labour and business will mobilise communities to stay safe by being vaccinated.

The Deputy President and I, as well as Ministers, Deputy Ministers, Premiers, MECs, Mayors and Councillors, will also be out in communities on Friday and Saturday to encourage citizens to get vaccinated.

The vaccination is free to everyone living in South Africa, whether you are a South African citizen or from another country.

You can go to a government or a private health facility that offers vaccinations, even if you don't have medical aid.

You can walk into your nearest vaccination site with your ID or other proof of identity and be registered on the spot.

The Vooma Vaccination Weekends are also an opportunity to acknowledge the immense contribution made by our frontline health workers and health service managers – from our community health workers who have gone door-to-door encouraging people to go to vaccination sites to our staff members at the sites and outreach vehicles and in health facilities across the country.

We also want to acknowledge the huge number of volunteers who have helped and the many initiatives by local leaders.

We must applaud the efforts that are being made by business to have their workers vaccinated.

We call on all businesses to facilitate the vaccination of their workers and encourage their workers to get vaccinated.

The involvement of all sectors of society in the national effort will become all the more critical in the run-up to local government elections in November.

Campaign activities pose the greatest risk to a surge in new infections.

Every one of us – from party leaders and organisers to supporters and elections staff – has a responsibility to ensure that the regulations are followed and all health protocols are observed during the election campaign.

The Independent Electoral Commission is putting in place measures to ensure that every voter can freely exercise their democratic right without being exposed to unnecessary risk.

Fellow South Africans,

When I announced on the 12th of September that the country would be moving to Adjusted Alert Level 2, I said that we would be reviewing the situation after two weeks.

The current trends in the progression of the pandemic mean that a number of the restrictions in place can be eased, as per the recommendations of the Ministerial Advisory Committee on COVID-19.

Following meetings of the National Coronavirus Command Council and the President's Coordinating Council, Cabinet has decided to move South Africa from Adjusted Alert Level 2 to Adjusted Alert Level 1 from midnight tonight.

The following measures will apply as part of Alert Level 1:

- The hours of the curfew will change, from 12 midnight to 4 am.
Non-essential establishments like restaurants, bars and fitness centres will need to close by 11 pm to allow their employees and patrons to travel home before the start of the curfew.
- The maximum number of people permitted to gather indoors will increase from 250 to 750, and the maximum number of people permitted to gather outdoors will increase from 500 to 2,000.

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.

- The maximum number of people permitted at a funeral will increase from 50 to 100. As before, night vigils, after-funeral gatherings and ‘after-tears’ gatherings are not allowed.
- The sale of alcohol – for both off-site and on-site consumption – will be permitted, according to normal licence provisions. However, no alcohol may be sold after 11 pm.
- The wearing of masks in public places is still mandatory, and failure to wear a mask when required remains a criminal offence.

As part of the effort to return the most affected parts of the economy to operation we are looking at further relaxation of restrictions, particularly with respect to sporting and cultural events.

As I said earlier, we all long for our freedom back, and if we continue to work together as we have been doing, more areas of activity will open up.

The Department of Health will soon be rolling out a vaccination certificate, which will provide a secure and verifiable proof of vaccination.

It can be used to facilitate travel, access to establishments and gatherings and other forms of activity that require proof of vaccination status.

Our approach is informed by World Health Organization guidelines and is in line with international best practice.

Streamlining and standardising proof of vaccination will also go a long way towards getting a number of international travel restrictions both from and into our country eased.

Getting vaccinated is not only about protecting yourself and those around you.

It is also about preventing new and more dangerous variants from emerging, as the virus is able to spread and mutate in unvaccinated populations.

However, we should remember that even if we are vaccinated, we need to continue to adhere to the basic precautions to limit the spread of the virus from one person to another.

We know that indoor gatherings, particularly in places that have poor ventilation, are the major cause of outbreaks and super spreader events.

We must continue wearing our masks at all times when in public, keep our distance from others and always ensure that windows are open and that there is a flow of fresh air.

If we continue to adhere to these regulations, if we keep the rate of infections low, and most importantly if we vaccinate significant numbers of the adult population, we will keep the pandemic at bay and eventually, force it into decline.

In an effort to prevent rising infections, a number of countries around the world have opted to restrict travel from other countries.

The United Kingdom imposed a travel ban on South Africans by red listing our country.

This has put us in a disadvantaged position, since the United Kingdom is South Africa's biggest source of tourism from the northern hemisphere and a significant trading partner.

While UK scientists were concerned about the presence of the Beta variant in South Africa, the reality is that the Delta variant is now by far the dominant variant in the country.

Earlier today I had a call with the British Prime Minister Boris Johnson to discuss this matter. I put South Africa's case to him, which he understood very well.

We both agreed that decisions of this nature should be informed by science and are hopeful of a positive outcome when the issue comes up for review in the coming days.

Fellow South Africans,

Our greatest priority now is to ensure that the economy recovers as quickly as possible, so that we can create jobs and help businesses to get back on their feet.

The only way that we can do this is if more South Africans choose to get vaccinated, more quickly.

If the majority of our population is vaccinated, we can declare South Africa to be a safe destination and welcome tourists back over the summer season.

We can resume sporting events and concerts, lift restrictions on restaurants and bars, and encourage people to return safely to their workplaces, shops and public spaces.

If we can reach our vaccination targets by the end of this year, we can avoid further restrictions and kick our economic recovery into high gear.

I want to urge you all to take advantage of Vooma Vaccination Weekends. Let us all go out and get vaccinated.

Let us take our friends and family who are not yet vaccinated to go and get vaccinated. Let us as one to reach our 70 per cent target by December.

Let us pick up the pace. Let us Vooma.

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

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