

TO : ALL MEDIA
ATTENTION : NEWS EDITORS/NEWS WIRES
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STATEMENT BY PRESIDENT CYRIL RAMAPHOSA ON CALL FOR A DAY OF PRAYER ON CORONAVIRUS, 26 MAY 2020

My fellow South Africans,

This evening, I would like to address you on matters that are of great importance to many people in our country – firstly, the call by religious leaders for a day of prayer as the country unites against the coronavirus pandemic, and, secondly, the decisions of the National Coronavirus Command Council on proposals made by religious leaders on the gradual resumption of certain religious activities.

The global coronavirus pandemic has had a profound impact on all South Africans.

Our Minister of Health today advised me that we now have over 20,000 people that have been infected and close to 500 people have lost their lives.

This continues to cause distress among all of us as citizens of South Africa.

At the same time, we are thankful that more than 11,000 people have recovered from the coronavirus.

Families are struggling to make ends meet.

Businesses have been badly hit and some have even had to be shut down.

People have lost their jobs and sources of income have dried up.

Because of the restrictions under the nation-wide lockdown, we have been unable to move around, to go to work, to study, to meet friends and family, and to attend religious services.

Yet, even at this time of crisis, we have cared for each other, shown compassion and solidarity, and sought to alleviate the plight of the most vulnerable.

This pandemic has also taken a toll on us emotionally and spiritually. It has shaken our sense of well-being and security. Many of us are anxious and fearful of both the present and the future.

As a nation, we have a responsibility to respond to this aspect of the pandemic with as much effort and urgency as we have responded to the health crisis, and as we have acted to relieve the economic and social effects on our people.

We have a responsibility to also take care of the spiritual, psychological and emotional well-being of all South Africans.

In helping our nation to cope with these difficulties, we acknowledge and welcome the call that has been made by our religious leaders for a day of prayer.

Prayer will comfort and strengthen us as we continue to confront this pandemic.

When I addressed the nation on Sunday, I said that we have been discussing with leaders of the religious community who have made a number of proposals around a gradual resumption of some religious activities and the manner in which they would like to exercise their functions.

The National Coronavirus Command Council discussed the proposals put to us by our religious leaders and determined that we should accede to the proposals put forward in accordance with certain norms and standards.

South Africans are a people of deep faith. Our faith is what has seen us through many dark times and sustained us.

We understand the great impact that the closure of places of worship have had on members of the faith community, and that this has worsened the distress of communities who are unable to worship in congregation.

Our leaders in the faith community provide spiritual guidance, care and counselling to millions of South Africans, and we are immensely grateful that from the beginning of our task of addressing this health crisis they have stood with us and provided advice, guidance, support and encouragement from the very beginning.

The faith community is an integral part of South African life and has made a great contribution in the fight against the coronavirus.

With our focus now on enabling our people to cope during this crisis and rebuilding our shattered economy, as well as assisting individuals and businesses whose livelihoods have been negatively impacted, we recognise and appreciate the important role the faith community has played in the provision of spiritual support and social relief.

Much of it has been done under extremely difficult circumstances and with minimal resources.

In such a time of crisis, the noble values that are shared by all faith communities have truly come to the fore – of charity and doing good works, of helping the needy, of feeding the hungry and caring for the sick.

Although the nation-wide lockdown has curtailed the activities of our faith based organisations, we have strongly felt their presence.

They have helped to keep our spirits up. They have encouraged us to remain focused. Above all they have consistently reminded our people that the lockdown regulations are in place for the common good and the welfare of us all.

As we now prepare to move to coronavirus alert level 3 on the 1st of June, we recognise and appreciate their deep desire to return to their duties, to serve their communities and to serve society.

After consideration following consultation with our religious leaders, we have therefore determined that as part of the regulations for alert level 3, the current restrictions on congregational worship will be eased in a carefully measured way.

Places of worship may re-open subject to strict restrictions, which are absolutely necessary if we are to prevent infections from rising in accordance with norms and standards that will be set out in the regulations.

Churches, synagogues, mosques, temples and other recognised places of worship may resume services, but these will be limited in size to 50 people or less depending on the space available.

Social distancing will have to be observed and all worshippers and participants will have to wear face masks in line with the current regulations.

All religious organisations must put protocols in place for, among other things, thoroughly cleaning and sanitising places for worship before and after services.

Our faith communities must ensure that any religious rituals that carry even the slightest possibility of exposing worshippers to risk should be avoided, and that where they form an essential part of religious practice, that sanitisation is paramount.

Our religious leaders will be recognised as essential religious frontline workers for purposes of spiritual counselling to members of their faith organisations.

Religious leaders will continue to officiate at funerals of no more than 50 people.

Our religious leaders occupy positions of immense trust and authority in our communities, and need to play a proactive role in raising the level of public awareness around the coronavirus in their services, in faith communication groups, and through their pastoral work and activities.

We welcome the offers that have been made by several religious bodies to make their facilities available for the fight against the coronavirus – by providing additional space for school lessons, for quarantine, for screening and testing or for places of shelter for survivors of gender-based violence.

This new phase of managing the coronavirus as a constant in our daily lives will be in many respects more difficult.

It demands vigilance and it will continue to demand sacrifices of us all.

The social distancing and hygiene measures that are in place under the lockdown will have to continue way into the future, and cannot be abandoned or compromised.

Let us continue to be guided by the overriding principle of doing whatever it takes to preserve life.

Our faith-based organisations have shown in both word and deed their commitment to the national effort to combat the coronavirus.

We will continue to engage with various constituencies across society around their concerns and the suggestions they have to move safely towards easing various restrictions.

Fellow South Africans,

Throughout this difficult time, we have remained firm and united.

Yet we know the race is far from won, and that the collective energies and efforts of all our people will be needed now as never before.

I therefore urge all South Africans to heed the call of the leaders of our various faith communities for a national day of prayer on Sunday, the 31st of May, when we will once again come together to pray for the healing of our land and the protection of our people.

On this day, wherever we may be, I call upon you to turn your thoughts to all who have been affected by this pandemic.

On this day, we should remember those who are working to keep us safe, those who are suffering and grieving.

Whether you are a person of faith or not, there is one belief that unites us, and that is our belief in South Africa, in its people, in their courage and in their ability to overcome even the greatest of tribulations.

As we worked tirelessly to heal the divisions of the past, so too will our united action bring us healing from this pandemic.

May God bless South Africa and protect her people.

I thank you.

ISSUED BY THE PRESIDENCY OF THE REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA