

STATEMENT BY PRESIDENT CYRIL RAMAPHOSA ON PROGRESS IN THE NATIONAL EFFORT TO CONTAIN THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC, UNION BUILDINGS, TSHWANE, 12 SEPTEMBER 2021

My Fellow South Africans,

This evening, I would like to begin by telling you about the experience we have had as a nation in one week in the work we are doing in the health care system in one of our provinces.

Between the dates of 14 and 20 August this year, the Western Cape Department of Health compiled figures on people above the age of 60 who were infected with COVID-19.

Only 30 out of 729 people above the age of 60 who were admitted to hospital for COVID-19 that week had been vaccinated.

This means that 699 of those were not vaccinated.

And of the 292 people above the age of 60 who died from COVID-19 that week, 287 of them were not vaccinated, meaning only 5 were vaccinated.

In other words, 96 per cent of the people over 60 who were hospitalised in the province and more than 98 per cent of the people over 60 who died were not vaccinated.

A similar pattern has emerged in hospitals across the country.

We know that a vaccinated person can still be infected and can still pass on the virus to others.

But what we are seeing is that very few people who are vaccinated against COVID-19 are becoming severely ill with the disease, and very few are ending up in ICU or needing ventilation.

Most importantly, people who are vaccinated against COVID-19 are far less likely to die of the disease.

South Africa is fast becoming a vaccination site.

Over a quarter of all adult South Africans have received at least one vaccine dose and more than 7 million people are fully vaccinated.

In the Eastern Cape, Limpopo and the Western Cape, more than 1 in 5 adults is now fully vaccinated.

The total number of vaccine doses administered in the country now stands at 14.6 million doses.

We are now administering a million doses every 4 to 5 days.

Government has secured sufficient vaccines to vaccinate the entire adult population, and the supply of vaccines is no longer a constraint.

However, we need to do much more.

And we are doing more as we improve our ways of working.

We are increasing the pace of vaccination and ensuring that we reach those that are most vulnerable to serious illness.

While everyone aged 18 years and older is eligible to be vaccinated, we are concentrating our efforts and resources on those over 60 years of age and those with co-morbidities.

To date, over 57 per cent of persons over 60 years of age have been vaccinated.

This is a great achievement, but we need to reach them all.

We are finding that more women than men are coming forward to be vaccinated against COVID-19.

Although the numbers are improving, men are still slow in coming forward to be vaccinated.

We are spreading the message in all languages to ensure that people understand that these vaccines are safe, effective and free.

Many people around the world are being vaccinated, with more than five and a half billion vaccine doses having been administered worldwide thus far.

There is now overwhelming evidence from hundreds of countries that vaccines are safe and provide strong protection.

We have taken steps to make it easier for people to access vaccination wherever they are.

We now have more than 3,000 public and private vaccination sites across the country, and most private sites will vaccinate any member of the public for free whether you have health insurance or not.

I want to stress that the vaccination programme is open to all people in South Africa, whether or not they are South African citizens.

It is important to bear in mind that this is a new virus that the world has never encountered before.

Although nobody can predict how the virus will mutate further, the scientific community has developed innovative ways of tracking the emergence of new variants.

If many people are not vaccinated and remain vulnerable to infection, the chance of new and more dangerous variants emerging is far greater.

That is why vaccines are currently the most potent weapon we have to fight this pandemic.

The sooner we are all vaccinated, the sooner we can open up sports venues to spectators.

The sooner we are all vaccinated the sooner we can welcome tourists to our beautiful country.

If we are all vaccinated, the sooner we can meet with friends and family, the sooner we can return to offices and other places of work.

When we are vaccinated, we will be able to return our economy to full operation and create the jobs that our country needs.

Importantly, when we are vaccinated, we will be able to restore all our other critical health interventions and relieve the strain on our health workers.

It is up to each and every one of us to convince our family, friends and co-workers that vaccination is safe and that it could save their lives.

When I last addressed the nation, we were heading towards the peak of the third wave of infections, which was being driven by the Delta variant of the virus.

The Delta variant is far more transmissible than earlier variants and, because it infects far more people, placed a great strain on our health facilities.

We said then that the third wave would be more severe and last longer than the previous two waves, and that has proven to be correct.

While the third wave is not yet over, we have seen a sustained decline in infections across the country over the last few weeks.

The average number of daily new infections over the last week is 29 per cent lower than the preceding 7 days, and 48 per cent lower than the 7 days before that.

While the third wave peaked in Gauteng far earlier and declined far faster than in other provinces, there is now a marked decline across all provinces.

The two provinces that stand out from the others are the Northern Cape and Free State, where the number of infections as a proportion of the population has remained relatively high for several months.

We are therefore focusing our efforts on these provinces to understand what is driving these infections and what measures we need to take to bring them down.

With the decline of infections across all provinces, the Ministerial Advisory Committee on COVID-19 has recommended an easing of restrictions on the movement of people and gatherings.

These recommendations have been discussed at the National Coronavirus Command Council and with Premiers, mayors and traditional leaders in the President's Coordinating Council. They have also been discussed with the leaders of political parties represented in Parliament and with faith based organisations.

Based on these discussions, Cabinet has therefore decided that the country should be moved from Adjusted Alert Level 3 and placed on Adjusted Alert Level 2 with effect from tomorrow, Monday, the 13th of September 2021.

This means that:

- The hours of curfew will now start at 11pm and end at 4am.
- Non-essential establishments like restaurants, bars and fitness centres will need to close by 10pm. This is to allow their employees and patrons to travel home before the start of the curfew.
- All gatherings will be limited to a maximum of 250 people indoors and 500 people 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.

This includes religious services, political events and social gatherings, as well as restaurants, bars, taverns and similar places.

- The sale of alcohol from retail outlets for off-site consumption will be permitted between 10am and 6pm from Monday to Friday.

- Alcohol sales for on-site consumption will be permitted as per licence conditions up to 10pm.

Alcohol consumption remains prohibited in public spaces.

These measures will be reviewed in two weeks time depending on the state of the pandemic.

We will also be providing further information on an approach to 'vaccine passports', which can be used as evidence of vaccination for various purposes and events.

Several important measures remain in place.

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, and the managers of shops and restaurants as well as drivers of taxis and buses have a responsibility to ensure that their customers wear masks, and that the appropriate social distancing measures are in place.

Funerals remain restricted to no more than 50 people, and, as before, night vigils, after-funeral gatherings and 'after-tears' gatherings are not allowed.

We are able to ease these restrictions thanks to the efforts of all South Africans to adhere to the regulations and basic health measures.

We are particularly thankful to those sectors of society that have had to endure restrictions on their activities for some time.

I speak here of religious communities of all faiths, which have been unable to worship and minister to the needs of their congregants as they normally would.

I speak of the artists, promoters, performers and cultural workers who have had to find other outlets for their work and who have endured great difficulties.

I speak of the owners of restaurants, bars, taverns, hotels, conference venues and others in the hospitality sector that have seen a massive decline in their business.

We recognise these hardships and will continue to find ways, within our means, of supporting these sectors and taking steps to enable their recovery.

The vaccination drive offers an opportunity to open up many of the venues that have remained closed, and we are continuing to work with all partners to find the safest and quickest way to do this.

It needs to be emphasised that the third wave is not yet over, and it is only through our actions – individually and collectively – that we will be able reduce the number of new infections still further.

Once we have done that, our priority must be to prevent a resurgence of infections.

Our most urgent task is to vaccinate our population so that as many people as possible are protected from severe illness or death before any resurgence of infections.

The more people that get vaccinated before December, the less likely it is that we will experience a devastating fourth wave over the holiday period.

That is the greatest reason for all of us who have not yet done so to get to a vaccination site and get protected.

We must take seriously the need to ventilate our homes, workplaces and any places where people gather.

COVID-19 is transmitted through the air, and therefore, we should all be concerned when we find ourselves in enclosed areas without adequate ventilation.

Those responsible for organising indoor meetings should ensure there is a sufficient flow of air through the venue.

In exactly 50 days' time, South Africans will go to the polls in local government elections.

It is vital that as we undertake this great democratic exercise, we do everything within our means to prevent a resurgence of COVID-19 infections.

At the same time, we need to ensure that the pandemic does not limit the ability of all South Africans to freely exercise their democratic right to elect their local councillors.

This is a matter that I discussed with political party leaders earlier in the week, and there is a firm commitment from all parties that election campaigning should adhere to the state of disaster regulations and all health protocols.

We urge all South Africans to exercise their right to campaign responsibly and take care to safeguard their own health and the health of others.

While we intensify the fight against COVID-19, we cannot ignore the other pandemic that is causing such misery and damage in our society.

We have just finished Women's Month, where we planned to celebrate the success of women in many fields.

Instead, our country bore witness to several brutal attacks by men against women.

This month alone there have been a number of terrible crimes committed against women and girls.

There was Fort Hare law student, Ms Nosicelo Mtebeni, who was murdered and dismembered in East London; there was the Grade One pupil from Khensani Primary School in Soshanguve, who was raped in the school's toilets; there was Ms Palesa Maruping, who was found hanging from the ceiling of a house in Khuma Location in the North West; and Ms Pheliswa Sawutana, who was strangled to death in Kosovo informal settlement in Cape Town.

These are just the cases that were covered in the media; there were others that were not.

These gruesome acts of violence cannot go unpunished.

They must strengthen our resolve to end gender-based violence in all its forms.

We must strengthen our efforts across all fronts.

The National Assembly has approved three critical pieces of legislation that will further strengthen the criminal justice system and ensure harsh penalties for those found guilty of gender-based violence.

The courts are increasingly handing down judgements for life imprisonment for statutory rape, robbery and aggravating sentences that involve rape.

We continue to implement all the pillars of the National Strategic Plan against Gender-Based Violence and Femicide.

Ultimately, the success of this work depends on the actions that we all take to end this pandemic of violence against women and children.

I wish to once again make a call to the men of this country to understand that the rights and freedoms guaranteed by our Constitution belong to all people, men and women alike.

We continue to implement measures to assist households, employees and businesses that have been affected by the pandemic and by the public violence that occurred in parts of KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng in July.

Since we re-opened applications for the special Social Relief of Distress grant in the first week of August, we have received nearly 13 million applications.

Of these, 8.3 million applications have been approved, and payments have started to these recipients.

Just over 3.7 million applications were declined, mainly because applicants have other identified sources of income or are registered for assistance like UIF and NSFAS.

Around 845,000 applications are still in the validation process.

Along with the other measures we have put in place, this grant is providing critical assistance to unemployed South Africans at this most difficult time.

My fellow South Africans,

Since the outbreak of the pandemic, we have looked out for one another, and we have protected one another.

With millions of people already vaccinated and millions of vaccine doses in stock, we are getting ever closer to containing the pandemic.

The day will soon come when we can gather again without restrictions, fill stadiums and music venues, travel and move about freely without the fear of becoming ill or losing our loved ones.

How soon that day arrives depends on one thing: how many of us get vaccinated and how quickly.

We have overcome three waves of infection because of our collective resolve and our adherence to basic health precautions.

Let us make it our mission to vaccinate as many people as we can, so that we can move ahead with the task of rebuilding our economy and our lives.

God bless South Africa and protect her people.

I thank you.

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