

**STATEMENT BY PRESIDENT CYRIL RAMAPHOSA ON PROGRESS IN THE
NATIONAL EFFORT TO CONTAIN THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

UNION BUILDINGS, TSHWANE

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My Fellow South Africans,

It is almost exactly two years since I stood before you to announce that South Africa would be entering a nation-wide lockdown to contain the spread of the COVID-19 virus.

This was a drastic and unprecedented measure.

But it slowed the spread of the virus so that our health facilities – and indeed our society – had time to prepare for the anticipated surge in infections.

Since then, we have had to adjust our response as the pandemic has changed, as infections have risen and fallen, and as our health facilities have come under pressure.

For two years, our lives have been shaped by this pandemic.

South Africa has had more than 3.7 million cases, and has recorded nearly 100,000 COVID-19 deaths.

The pandemic has changed the way we work, travel, worship and socialise.

It has devastated our economy, leading to the closure of many businesses and the loss of some two million jobs.

Yet it has also shown South Africans to be a caring and compassionate people, coming to each other's assistance at the hour of the greatest need.

When called upon to observe restrictions on movement, gatherings and activity, South Africans have done so, knowing that it is for the good of the country.

Over the past two years, we have taken unprecedented actions to strengthen our health system, build laboratory capacity and prevent infections.

We are now at a watershed moment.

We are now ready to enter a new phase in our management of the pandemic.

After four waves of infection, fewer people are becoming severely ill and requiring hospitalisation. There are far fewer deaths than before.

Our scientists tell us that this is mainly because some 60 to 80% of the population has some form of immunity to the virus, either from previous infection or vaccination.

From the experience of the past two years, our health services have learnt to manage the disease more effectively.

As a population, we have gotten used to wearing masks and avoiding unventilated spaces.

Most importantly, nearly half of all adults have received at least one vaccine dose.

We therefore enter the third year of this pandemic more hopeful than ever before.

While the pandemic is not yet over, and while we remain cautious, we see many parts of our daily life returning to normal.

We see our economy returning to full operation.

We feel the fear and despair of the last two years lifting from our shoulders.

Due to the changing nature of the pandemic, and due to the progress that has been made through our collective efforts, we will soon be in a position to lift the National State of Disaster.

The Minister of Health has published draft health regulations for public comment.

These regulations, when finalised, will replace the State of Disaster regulations as the legal instrument that we use to manage the pandemic.

All South Africans are invited to make comments on the draft regulations before the 15th of April.

We do, however, need to be clear on one thing: the end of the National State of Disaster does not mean the end of the pandemic.

It just means that we are changing the way we manage the pandemic.

It means that we are learning to live with the virus in our presence.

It means that we are returning, as far as possible, to the lives that we lived before the pandemic, that we are opening up our economy still further, and that we are resuming many of the social and cultural activities that we have missed over the last two years.

Since October last year, the country has been at Adjusted Alert Level 1, which has meant that many normal activities have resumed with health guidelines followed at all times.

Most of the restrictions on economic activity have been lifted.

We are now in a position to ease the restrictions further.

In deciding which restrictions to ease and which to keep in place, we are guided – as before – by the advice of the Ministerial Advisory Committee on COVID-19.

We also look to the experiences of other countries, including those where the complete lifting of restrictions has been followed by a surge in infections and deaths.

We have also consulted widely with various stakeholders, including religious bodies and traditional leaders.

Earlier today, we held a meeting of the Presidential Coordinating Council, which brings together representatives of national, provincial and local government, as well as traditional leaders.

Based on those consultations and the recommendations of the National Coronavirus Command Council, Cabinet has decided to ease several restrictions as part of Adjusted Alert Level 1.

There will be important changes to the restrictions on gatherings.

As before, both indoor and outdoor gatherings are restricted to no more than 50% of the venue capacity.

However, where access to the gathering is restricted to people who can produce a proof of vaccination or negative COVID test [PCR and antigen?] not older than 72 hours, there is no upper limit on the actual number of people who may attend.

As long as it does not exceed 50% of the venue's capacity.

But, where there is no requirement for proof of vaccination or a COVID test, then the current upper limit will remain – of 1,000 people indoors and 2,000 people outdoors.

This change to the restrictions on gatherings will benefit the sporting, cultural, entertainment and events industries in particular.

The maximum number of people permitted at a funeral will increase from 100 to 200.

As before, night vigils, after-funeral gatherings and 'after-tears' gatherings are not allowed.

There are also important changes to the regulation on the wearing of masks.

As before, it is mandatory to wear a cloth mask or similar covering over the nose and mouth when in public indoor spaces.

However, a mask is not required when outdoors.

This means that we still need to wear masks when in shops, malls, offices, factories, taxis, buses, trains or any other indoor public space.

But we do not need to wear masks when walking on the street or in an open space, when exercising outdoors or when attending an outdoor gathering.

The regulations on social distancing are also being changed, requiring that a space of 1 metre is maintained between persons in all settings except schools.

There are also changes to the regulations on international travel.

Travellers leaving South Africa will need to show proof of vaccination or a negative PCR test not older than 72 hours.

They will also need to comply with the requirements of the country to which they are travelling.

Travellers entering South Africa will also need to show proof of vaccination or a negative PCR test not older than 72 hours.

All unvaccinated travellers entering the country will be offered vaccinations.

These measures will take effect tomorrow, Wednesday the 23rd of March 2022, once the new regulations are gazetted.

With these changes, almost all restrictions on social and economic activity will have been lifted.

Going forward, our most important defences against the disease are, firstly, vaccination and, secondly, the observance of basic measures, such as wearing masks indoors.

The further easing of the remaining restrictions will require that we increase the rate of vaccination among South Africans.

The vaccine has been shown to significantly reduce infections and severe illness.

Statistics from our health facilities, clearly show that people who are not vaccinated stand a higher chance of being hospitalised or dying from COVID-19.

Vaccination is likely to reduce transmission at home and at places like schools and universities where there is close contact.

Therefore, while we welcome the fact that more than 68% of people older than 60 years have been vaccinated, we should be concerned that only 35% of people between 18 and 35 years have been vaccinated,

That is why we launched the #KeReady campaign last month.

This campaign includes messages developed by younger persons which focus on making the case for younger persons to vaccinate.

We are working to ensure that vaccinations are available in relevant settings, including institutions of higher learning, schools and recreational venues.

The campaign also includes competitions and incentives aimed at encouraging and rewarding younger people who vaccinate and encourage others to vaccinate.

If we are to truly turn our back on the trauma of the last two years, we need to ensure that more and more of us are vaccinated.

We need to ensure that those who are vaccinated receive booster doses when needed.

By doing so, we can turn all our energy, resources and effort to rebuilding our economy and creating much-needed jobs.

Two years ago, as we announced the start of a nation-wide lockdown, I said that in the days, weeks and months ahead our resolve, our resourcefulness and our unity as a nation will be tested as never before.

I called on all of us to play our part: “To be courageous, to be patient, and above all, to show compassion.”

South Africa has responded to that call, time and again.

Once more, I call on us all to play our part – to get vaccinated as we embark with hope and determination on a new era in our fight against the pandemic.

I thank you.