

Dear Fellow South African,

Last night, I addressed the nation on the state of the coronavirus pandemic in our country. What follows is an edited version of that address:

Our nation is confronted by the gravest crisis in the history of our democracy. For more than 120 days, we have succeeded in delaying the spread of a virus that is causing devastation across the globe.

But now, the surge in infections that we had been advised by our medical experts would come, has arrived. More than a quarter of a million South Africans have been infected with coronavirus, and we know that many more infections have gone undetected. We are now recording over 12,000 new cases every day.

Since the start of the outbreak in March, at least 4,079 people have died from COVID-19. What should concern us most is that a quarter of those who died passed away in the last week.

Like the massive cold fronts that sweep into our country from the South Atlantic at this time of year, there are few parts of the country that will remain untouched by the coronavirus. The coronavirus storm is far fiercer and more destructive than any we have known before. It is stretching our resources and our resolve to their limits.

The surge of infections that our experts and scientists predicted over 3 months ago has now arrived. It started in the Western Cape and is now underway in the Eastern Cape and Gauteng.

Yet, while infections rise exponentially, it is important to note that our case fatality rate of 1.5% is among the lowest in the world. This is compared to a global average case fatality rate of 4.4%. We owe the relatively low number of deaths in our country to the experience and dedication of our health professionals and the urgent measures we have taken to build the capacity of our health system.

Even as most of our people have taken action to prevent the spread of the virus, there are others who have not. There are some among us who ignore the regulations that have been passed to combat the disease.

In the midst of such a pandemic, getting into a taxi without a face mask, gathering to meet friends, attending parties or even visiting family, can too easily spread the virus and cost lives. This may be a disease that is caused by a virus, but it is spread by human conduct and behaviour.

Through our own actions – as individuals, as families, as communities – we can and we must change the course of this pandemic in our country. We need to wear a cloth mask that covers our nose and mouth whenever we leave home. We must continue to regularly wash our hands with soap and water or sanitiser. We must continue to clean and sanitise all surfaces in all public spaces. Most importantly, we must keep a safe distance – of at least 2 metres – from other people.

There is now emerging evidence that the virus may also be carried in tiny particles in the air in places that are crowded, closed or have poor air circulation. For this reason we must immediately improve the indoor environment of public places where the risk of infection is greatest.

Our decision to declare a nation-wide lockdown prevented a massive early surge of infections when our health services were less prepared, which would have resulted in a far greater loss of lives.

In the time that we had, we have taken important measures to strengthen our health response. We have conducted more

than two million coronavirus tests and community health workers have done more than 20 million screenings.

We have made available almost 28,000 hospital beds for COVID-19 patients and have constructed functional field hospitals across the country. We now have over 37,000 quarantine beds in private and public facilities across the country, ready to isolate those who cannot do so at home.

We have procured and delivered millions of items of personal protective equipment to hospitals, clinics and schools across the country to protect our frontline workers. We have recruited and continue to recruit additional nurses, doctors and emergency health personnel.

We continue to make progress in our efforts to deal with COVID 19, but our greatest challenge still lies ahead. Across all provinces, we are working to further increase the number of general ward and critical beds available for COVID-19 patients.

Ward capacity is being freed up in a number of hospitals by delaying non-urgent care, the conversion of some areas of hospitals into additional ward space and the erection or expansion of field hospitals.

We are working to increase supplies of oxygen, ventilators and other equipment for those who will need critical care, including by diverting the supply of oxygen from other purposes. We are deploying digital technologies to strengthen the identification, tracing and isolation of contacts, and to provide support to those who test positive.

As we now approach the peak of infections, we need to take extra precautions and tighten existing measures to slow down the rate of transmission.

Regulations on the wearing of masks will be strengthened. Employers, shop owners and managers, public transport operators, and managers and owners of any other public building are now legally obliged to ensure that anyone entering their premises or vehicle must be wearing a mask.

Taxis undertaking local trips will now be permitted to increase their capacity to 100%, while long distance taxis will not be allowed to exceed 70% occupancy, on condition that new risk mitigation protocols related to masks, vehicle sanitising and open windows are followed.

There is now clear evidence that the resumption of alcohol sales has resulted in substantial pressure being put on hospitals, including trauma and ICU units, due to motor vehicle accidents, violence and related trauma. We have therefore decided that in order to conserve hospital capacity, the sale, dispensing and distribution of alcohol will be suspended with immediate effect.

As an additional measure to reduce the pressure on hospitals, a curfew will be put in place between the hours of 9pm and 4am.

We are taking these measures fully aware that they impose unwelcome restrictions on people's lives. They are, however, necessary to see us through the peak of the disease.

There is no way that we can avoid the coronavirus storm. But we can limit the damage that it can cause to our lives. As a nation we have come together to support each other, to provide comfort to those who are ill and to promote acceptance of people living with the virus.

Now, more than ever, we are responsible for the lives of those around us.

We will weather this storm. We will restore our country to health and to prosperity. We shall overcome.