

On Monday, President Cyril Ramaphosa took the unprecedented step in announcing a nationwide lockdown to contain the spread of the novel coronavirus (Covid-19).

For the first time in South Africa's 25 years of democracy, the President announced stringent restrictions which will be every South African's responsibility to bare to "flatten the curve" of Covid-19 infections. As of Monday, there were 402 positive Covid-19 cases. The President said the number would continue to rise. The lockdown, set to begin at 23:59 on Thursday and end on 16 April, will impact almost every sector of society, as well as ordinary people.

Why the lockdown?

Sacrifices and swift action now will save lives later, the President explained in his address to the nation. "Without decisive action, the number of people infected will rapidly increase from a few hundred to tens of thousands, and within a few weeks, to hundreds of thousands," he said.

"While this measure will have a considerable impact on people's livelihoods, on the life of our society and on our economy, the human cost of delaying this action would be far, far greater."

Who will be affected?

The lockdown will affect everyone. No one will be allowed to leave their homes for the 21 days unless under strictly controlled circumstances, including seeking medical care, buying food, medicine or other supplies and collecting social grants. For homeless people, shelters which meet hygiene standards are being identified, and for those who are unable to self-isolate at home, quarantine sites will be identified.

Which businesses will remain open?

All shops will be closed for this period except for:

- Pharmacies;
- Laboratories;
- Banks;
- Essential financial and payment services, including the JSE;
- Supermarkets;
- Petrol stations; and
- Healthcare providers

"Companies that are essential to the production and transportation of food, basic goods and medical supplies will remain open," the President said.

People necessary for the response to the virus are also exempted from the lockdown, including health workers, emergency personnel and security services (police, traffic officers, military medical personnel and soldiers).

"It will also include those involved in the production, distribution and supply of food and basic goods, essential banking services, the maintenance of power, water and telecommunications services, laboratory services and the provision of medical and hygiene products."

The South African National Defence Force (SANDF) has also been deployed to support the police in ensuring these measures are implemented.

Protecting our healthcare system

"This nationwide lockdown will be accompanied by a public health management programme which will significantly increase screening, testing, contact tracing and medical management," the President said. This means community health teams will focus on expanding screening and testing for Covid-19, especially in high-density and high-risk areas. A "centralised patient management system" for severe cases of Covid-19 will also be implemented to ensure hospitals are not overwhelmed. Mild cases will receive "decentralised primary care". To ensure people practise good hygiene, emergency water supplies will be provided in informal settlements and rural areas using storage tanks, water tanks, boreholes and communal standpipes.

Harsher travel restrictions

While restrictions were placed on travellers coming in and going out of the country, the President has tightened these measures. South African citizens arriving in the country will have to undergo a 14-day quarantine period. International travellers arriving from high-risk countries will simply be turned back. Those who landed after 9 March from high-risk countries will be confined to their hotels for a 14-day quarantine period.

An economic cushion

The President reiterated the dire impact Covid-19 could have on the economy, which could cause businesses to close and many to lose their jobs.

He announced economic plans to cushion South Africa against the impact of the virus, including a solidarity fund geared at support for those whose lives have been disrupted and to combat the virus.

Anyone can start contributing to the fund at www.solidarityfund.co.za.

A safety net for people in the informal sector whose businesses will suffer because of the lockdown has also been developed, and more details will be announced.

Further, "to alleviate congestion at payment points, old-age pensions and disability grants will be available for collection from 30 and 31 March 2020, while other categories of grants will be available for collection from 1 April 2020", the President said. ATMs, retail point of sale devices, post offices and cash pay points will remain open.

Protection for employees

A proposal for a special dispensation for companies in distress because of Covid-19 has been put forward. This will include wage payments for employees through the Temporary Employee Relief Scheme to help companies pay employees during this period and avoid retrenchment. Employees who fall ill due to exposure in the workplace will be paid through the Compensation Fund, the President said.

He said government would provide tax subsidies of up to R500 a month for the next four months to private sector employees earning less than R6 500. This would assist over four million employees, he said.

Government's inter-ministerial committee is set to hold a press briefing on Tuesday afternoon, where it's expected that several ministers in the President's Cabinet will further explain the implications and details of the lockdown.

We await for further details and clarity and for the answers to the questions which include including whether the security forces are adequately prepared, how movement will be limited and whether or not people can still run or walk as a form of exercise during the lockdown