



**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,

Earlier this week, our scientists identified a new variant of the coronavirus that causes the COVID-19 disease.

The World Health Organization has named it Omicron and has declared it a 'variant of concern'.

The Omicron variant was first described in Botswana and subsequently in South Africa, and scientists have also identified cases in countries such as Hong Kong, Australia, Belgium, Italy, the United Kingdom, Germany, Austria, Denmark and Israel.

The early identification of this variant is a result of the excellent work done by our scientists in South Africa and is a direct result of the investment that our Science and Innovation and Health Departments have made in our genomic surveillance capabilities.

We are one of the countries in the world that set up a surveillance network throughout the country to help us monitor the behaviour of COVID-19.

The early detection of this variant and the work that has already gone in to understanding its properties and possible effects means that we are better equipped to respond to the variant.

We pay tribute to all our scientists who are world-renowned and widely respected and have demonstrated that they have a deep knowledge of epidemiology.

There are a number of things that we already know about the variant as a result of the work our scientists have been doing on genome surveillance.

Firstly, we now know that Omicron has far more mutations than any previous variant.

Secondly, we know that Omicron is readily detected by the current COVID-19 tests.

This means that people who are showing COVID-19 symptoms or have been in contact with someone who is COVID-19 positive, should still get tested.

Thirdly, we know that this variant is different from other circulating variants and that it is not directly related to the Delta or Beta variants.

Fourthly, we know that the variant is responsible for most of the infections found in Gauteng over the last two weeks and is now showing up in all other provinces.

There are still a number of things about the variant that we do not know, and that scientists in South Africa and elsewhere in the world are still hard at work to establish.

Over the next few days and weeks, as more data becomes available, we will have a better understanding of:

- whether Omicron is transmitted more easily between people,
- whether it increases the risk of reinfection,
- whether the variant causes more severe disease, and,
- how effective the current vaccines are against the variant Omicron.

The identification of Omicron coincides with a sudden rise in COVID-19 infections.

This increase has been centred in Gauteng, although cases are also rising in other provinces.

We have seen an average of 1,600 new cases in the last 7 days, compared to just 500 new daily cases in the previous week, and 275 new daily cases the week before that.

The proportion of COVID-19 tests that are positive has risen from around 2 per cent to 9 per cent in less than a week.

This is an extremely sharp rise in infections in a short space of time.

If cases continue to climb, we can expect to enter a fourth wave of infections within the next few weeks, if not sooner.

This should not come as a surprise.

Epidemiologists and disease modellers have told us that we should expect a fourth wave in early December.

Scientists have also told us to expect the emergence of new variants.

There are several concerns about the Omicron variant, and we are still not sure exactly how it will behave going forward.

However, we already have the tools that we need to protect ourselves against it.

We know enough about the variant to know what we need to do to reduce transmission and to protect ourselves against severe disease and death.

The first, the most powerful, tool we have is vaccination.

Since the first COVID-19 vaccines became available late last year, we have seen how vaccines have dramatically reduced severe illness, hospitalisation and death in South Africa and across the world.

Vaccines do work. Vaccines are saving lives.

Since we launched our public vaccination programme in May 2021, over 25 million vaccine doses have been administered in South Africa.

This is a remarkable achievement.

It is by far the most extensive health intervention undertaken in this country in such a short period of time.

Forty-one percent of the adult population have received at least one vaccine dose, and 35.6 per cent of adult South Africans are fully vaccinated against COVID-19.

Significantly, 57 per cent of people 60 years old and above are fully vaccinated, and 53 per cent of people aged between 50 and 60 are fully vaccinated.

While this is welcome progress, it is not enough to enable us to reduce infections, prevent illness and death and restore our economy.

Vaccination against COVID-19 is free.

Tonight, I would like to call on every person who has not been vaccinated to go to their nearest vaccination station without delay.

If there is someone in your family or among your friends who is not vaccinated, I call on you to encourage them to get vaccinated.

Vaccination is by far the most important way to protect yourself and those around you against the Omicron variant, to reduce the impact of the fourth wave and to help restore the social freedoms we all yearn for.

Vaccination is also vital to the return of our economy to full operation, to the resumption of travel and to the recovery of vulnerable sectors like tourism and hospitality.

The development of the vaccines we have against COVID-19 has been made possible thanks to the millions of ordinary people who have volunteered to participate in these trials to advance scientific knowledge for the benefit of humanity.

They are the people who have proven that these vaccines are safe and effective.

These people are our heroes.

They join the ranks of the health care workers who have been at the forefront of the fight against the pandemic for close on two years, and who continue to care for the sick, who continue to administer vaccines, and who continue to save lives.

We need to be thinking about the people who have been courageous when we consider getting vaccinated.

By getting vaccinated, we are not only protecting ourselves, but we are also reducing the pressure on our health care system and our health care workers and reducing the risks faced by our healthcare workers.

South Africa, like a number of other countries, is looking at booster vaccines for people who are at greatest risk and for whom a booster may be beneficial.

Health care workers in the Sisonke trial, many of whom who were vaccinated more than six months ago, are being offered Johnson & Johnson booster doses.

Pfizer has filed an application to the South African Health Products Regulatory Authority for a third dose to be administered after the two dose primary series.

The Ministerial Advisory Committee on Vaccines has already indicated that it will recommend a staged introduction of boosters commencing with the older population.

Other people with immunodeficiency, such as those on cancer treatment, renal dialysis and on steroids treatment for auto-immune diseases, are allowed booster doses on recommendation of their doctors.

As individuals, as companies and as government, we have a responsibility to ensure that all people in this country can work, travel and socialise safely.

We have therefore been undertaking engagements with social partners and other stakeholders on introducing measures that make vaccination a condition for access to workplaces, public events, public transport and public establishments.

This includes discussions that have been taking place at NEDLAC between government, labour, business and the community constituency, where there is broad agreement on the need for such measures.

Government has set up a task team that will undertake broad consultations on making vaccination mandatory for specific activities and locations.

The task team will report to the Inter-Ministerial Committee on Vaccination chaired by the Deputy President, which will make recommendations to Cabinet on a fair and sustainable approach to vaccine mandates.

We realise that the introduction of such measures is a difficult and complex issue, but if we do not address this seriously and as a matter of urgency, we will continue to be vulnerable to new variants and will continue to suffer new waves of infection.

The second tool we have to fight the new variant is to continue to wear our face masks whenever we are in public spaces and in the company of people outside our households.

There is now overwhelming evidence that the proper and consistent wearing of a cloth mask or other suitable face covering over both the nose and mouth is the best way to prevent the transmission of the virus from one person to another.

The third tool we have to fight the new variant is the cheapest and the most abundant: fresh air.

This means that we must try as much as possible to be outdoors when we meet people outside our household.

When we are indoors with other people, or in cars, buses and taxis, we need to keep windows open to ensure that air can flow freely through the space.

The fourth tool we have to fight the new variant is to avoid gatherings, particularly indoor gatherings.

Mass gatherings such as major conferences and meetings, especially those that require a large number of people to be in close contact over extended periods, should be changed to virtual formats.

End-of-year parties and matric year-end raves as well as other celebrations should ideally be postponed, and every person should think twice before attending or organising a gathering.

Where gatherings do take place, all the necessary COVID protocols must be closely observed.

Every additional contact we have increases our risk of becoming infected or infecting someone else.

Fellow South Africans,

The National Coronavirus Command Council met yesterday to consider the recent rise in infections and the possible impact of the Omicron variant.

This was followed by meetings earlier today of the President's Coordinating Council and Cabinet, where a decision was taken that the country should remain on Coronavirus Alert Level 1 for now and that the National State of Disaster should remain in place.

In taking the decision not to impose further restrictions at this stage, we considered the fact that when we encountered previous waves of infection, vaccines were not widely available and far fewer people were vaccinated.

That is no longer the case. Vaccines are available to anyone aged 12 and above, free of charge, at thousands of sites across the country.

We know that they prevent severe disease and hospitalisation.

We also know that the coronavirus will be with us for the long term. We must therefore find ways of managing the pandemic while limiting disruptions to the economy and ensuring continuity.

However, this approach will not be sustainable if we do not increase the vaccination rate, if we do not wear masks, or if we fail to adhere to basic health precautions.

We should all remember that in terms of Alert Level 1 regulations:

- There is still a curfew in place from 12 midnight to 4 am.
- No more than 750 people may gather indoors and no more than 2,000 people may gather 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.
- No more than 100 people are permitted at a funeral, and night vigils, after-funeral gatherings and 'after-tears' gatherings are not allowed.
- The wearing of masks in public places is still mandatory, and failure to wear a mask when required remains a criminal offence.
- The sale of alcohol is permitted according to the regular licence conditions, but may not be sold during curfew hours.

We will closely monitor infection rates and hospitalisation over the coming days and will review the situation in another week.

We will then need to determine whether the existing measures are adequate or whether changes need to be made to the current regulations.

We have started the process of amending our health regulations so that we can review the use of the Disaster Management Act to manage our response to the pandemic, with a view to ultimately lifting the National State of Disaster.

We will also implement our national resurgence plan to ensure that hospitals and other medical facilities are ready for the fourth wave.

We are focusing on effective clinical governance, contact tracing and screening, effective clinical care, availability of health personnel.

To ensure our facilities are ready, all hospital beds that were available or required during the third wave of COVID-19 are planned and prepared for the fourth wave.

We are also working to ensure that oxygen supply is available to all beds earmarked for COVID-19 care.

We will continue to be guided by the World Health Organization on international travel, which advises against the closure of borders.

Like most other countries, we already have the means to control the importation of variants to other countries.

This includes the requirement that travellers produce a vaccination certificate and a negative PCR test taken within 72 hours of travel, and that masks are worn for the duration of travel.

We are deeply disappointed by the decision of several countries to prohibit travel from a number of Southern African countries following the identification of the Omicron variant.

This is a clear and completely unjustified departure from the commitment that many of these countries made at the meeting of G20 countries in Rome last month.

They pledged at that meeting to restart international travel in a safe and orderly manner, consistent with the work of relevant international organisations such as the World Health Organization, the International Civil Aviation Organization, the International Maritime Organization and the OECD.

The G20 Rome Declaration noted the plight of the tourism sector in developing countries, and made a commitment to support a “rapid, resilient, inclusive and sustainable recovery of the tourism sector”.

Countries that have imposed travel restrictions on our country and some of our Southern African sister countries include the United Kingdom, United States, European Union members, Canada, Turkey, Sri Lanka, Oman, the United Arab Emirates, Australia, Japan, Thailand, Seychelles, Brazil and Guatemala, among others.

These restrictions are unjustified and unfairly discriminate against our country and our Southern African sister countries.

The prohibition of travel is not informed by science, nor will it be effective in preventing the spread of this variant.

The only thing the prohibition on travel will do is to further damage the economies of the affected countries and undermine their ability to respond to, and recover from, the pandemic.

We call upon all those countries that have imposed travel bans on our country and our Southern African sister countries to urgently reverse their decisions and lift the ban they have imposed before any further damage is done to our economies and to the livelihoods of our people.

There is no scientific justification for keeping these restrictions in place.

We know that this virus, like all viruses, does mutate and form new variants.

We also know that the likelihood of the emergence of more severe forms of variants is increased significantly where people are not vaccinated.

That is why we have joined many countries, organisations and people around the world who have been fighting for equal access to vaccines for everyone.

We have said that vaccine inequality not only costs lives and livelihoods in those countries that are denied access, but that it also threatens global efforts to overcome the pandemic.

The emergence of the Omicron variant should be a wake-up call to the world that vaccine inequality cannot be allowed to continue.

Until everyone is vaccinated, everyone will be at risk.

Until everyone is vaccinated, we should expect that more variants will emerge.

These variants may well be more transmissible, may cause more severe disease, and may be more resistant to the current vaccines.

Instead of prohibiting travel, the rich countries of the world need to support the efforts of developing economies to access and to manufacture enough vaccine doses for their people without delay.

Fellow South Africans,

The emergence of the Omicron variant and the recent rise in cases have made it clear that we will have to live with this virus for some time to come.

We have the knowledge, we have the experience and we have the tools to manage this pandemic, to resume many of our daily activities, and to rebuild our economy.

We have the ability to determine the path our country will take.

Every one of us needs to get vaccinated.

Every one of us needs to practice the basic health protocols like wearing masks, washing or sanitising our hands regularly, and avoiding crowded and closed spaces.

Every one of us needs to take responsibility for our own health and the health of those around us.

Every one of us has a role to play.

We will not be defeated by this pandemic.

We have already started learning to live with it.

We will endure, we will overcome and we will thrive.

God bless South Africa and protect her people.

I thank you.