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FULL SPEECH: PRESIDENT RAMAPHOSA'S COVID-19 UPDATE

Cyril Ramaphosa addressed the nation on Thursday night, asking South Africans to 'endure even longer' as he extended the lockdown by two more weeks.

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My Fellow South Africans,

At midnight tonight, it will be exactly two weeks since our country entered into an unprecedented nation-wide lockdown to contain the spread of the coronavirus.

During the course of these last two weeks, your lives have been severely disrupted, you have suffered great hardship and endured much uncertainty.

We have closed our borders to the world, our children are not in school, businesses have closed their operations, many have lost their income, and our economy has ground to a halt.

And yet, faced with such daunting challenges, you, the people of South Africa, have responded with remarkable patience and courage.

You have respected the lockdown and largely observed the regulations.

You have accepted the severe restrictions on your movement and many of the daily freedoms that we all take for granted.

You have done so because you have understood the devastating effect that this disease will have on the health and well-being of all South Africans unless we take drastic measures.

You have also understood that we must do everything in our power to prevent the massive loss of life that would occur if we did not act.

For your cooperation, for your commitment and above all for your patience, I wish to thank you personally.

I wish to thank you for reaffirming to each other and to the world that we South Africans are a people who come together and unite at moments of great crisis.

Earlier today I had a most productive meeting with our Premiers about the work they are doing in provinces and districts to stop the spread of the virus.

I also had a discussion with the leaders of all our political parties represented in Parliament, who collectively pledged their support for the efforts that are being made to combat the pandemic.

Through this we are demonstrating that we are able to work together across party lines to confront a common threat.

Since I announced the lockdown just over two weeks ago, the global coronavirus pandemic has worsened.

Two weeks ago, there were 340,000 confirmed coronavirus cases in the world.

We now have over 1.5 million confirmed cases worldwide.

Over 90,000 people across the world have died from this disease.

The health systems of many countries have been overwhelmed.

Even the most developed economies in the world have not had the means to treat the many thousands who have fallen ill.

They have struggled to find the medical supplies and personnel necessary to deal with the pandemic.

The devastating effect of this is that many people have died.

The global evidence is overwhelming.

It confirms that our decision to declare a national state of disaster and to institute a nation-wide lockdown was correct and it was timely.

While it is too early to make a definitive analysis of the progression of the disease in South Africa, there is sufficient evidence to show that the lockdown is working.

Since the lockdown came into effect, the rate at which new cases have been identified here in South Africa has slowed significantly.

From 1,170 confirmed cases on the 27th of March, the number of confirmed cases today stands at 1,934.

In the two weeks before the lockdown, the average daily increase in new cases was around 42%.

Since the start of the lockdown, the average daily increase has been around 4%.

While we recognise the need to expand testing to gain a better picture of the infection rate, this represents real progress.

The measures we have taken – such as closing our borders and prohibiting gatherings – as well as the changes that we have each had to make in our own behaviour, have definitely slowed the spread of the virus.

But the struggle against the coronavirus is far from over.

We are only at the beginning of a monumental struggle that demands our every resource and our every effort.

We cannot relax. We cannot be complacent.

In the coming weeks and months, we must massively increase the extent of our response and expand the reach of our interventions.

We are learning both from the experiences of other countries and from the evidence we now have about the development of the pandemic in South Africa.

Both make a clear and compelling case to proceed in a manner that is cautious and properly calibrated.

Simply put, if we end the lockdown too soon or too abruptly, we risk a massive and uncontrollable resurgence of the disease.

We risk reversing the gains we have made over the last few weeks, and rendering meaningless the great sacrifices we have all made.

Fellow South Africans,

This evening, I stand before you to ask you to endure even longer.

I have to ask you to make even greater sacrifices so that our country may survive this crisis and so that tens of thousands of lives may be saved.

After careful consideration of the available evidence, the National Coronavirus Command Council has decided to extend the nation-wide lockdown by a further two weeks beyond the initial 21 days.

This means that most of the existing lockdown measures will remain in force until the end of April.

We will use the coming days to evaluate how we will embark on risk-adjusted measures that can enable a phased recovery of the economy, allowing the return to operation of certain sectors under strictly controlled conditions.

We will also use this time to ramp up our public health interventions.

We did not take this decision to extend the lockdown lightly.

As your President, I am mindful of the great and heavy burden this will impose on you.

I am keenly aware of the impact this will have on our economy.

But I know, as you do, that unless we take these difficult measures now, unless we hold to this course for a little longer, the coronavirus pandemic will engulf, and ultimately consume, our country.

We all want the economy to come back to life, we want people to return to work, we want our children to go back to school, and we all want to be able to move freely again.

But our immediate priority must remain to slow down the spread of the virus and to prevent a massive loss of life.

We must do this while preventing our economy from collapsing and saving our people from hunger.

We are determined to pursue a path that both saves lives and protects livelihoods.

Our strategy is made up of three parts:

- Firstly, an intensified public health response to slow down and reduce infections.
- Secondly, a comprehensive package of economic support measures to assist businesses and individuals affected by the pandemic.
- Thirdly, a programme of increased social support to protect poor and vulnerable households.

As government, together with our many partners, we have used this lockdown period to both refine and intensify our public health strategy to manage the coronavirus.

Our approach is to screen in communities and test people in hospitals, clinics and mobile clinics, to isolate those who are infected, and to care for those who are ill in our health facilities.

We need to do this intensively and systematically.

We have used the last week to develop our screening and testing methodology in various parts of the country.

Over the next two weeks, we will roll out the community screening and testing programme across all provinces, focusing in particular on highly vulnerable communities.

Those who test positive and cannot self-isolate at home will be isolated at special facilities that have been identified and are now being equipped.

At all times, we will observe the human rights of all people.

Let us not discriminate against people who test positive.

To ensure that our strategies are effectively coordinated and to ensure they are informed by comprehensive, real-time data, we have established the COVID-19 Information Centre at the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research.

This world-class centre will keep track of all screening, testing, isolation and hospitalisation throughout the country.

It is already identifying infection hotspots.

It is following the spread and the severity of the disease, and enabling us to move our focus and resources where they are most needed.

We are working with mobile telephony companies and other institutions to locate those people who have tested positive for the virus and those with whom they have been in contact.

As part of the second element of our strategy, we have put in place various measures to provide support to businesses in distress, to workers facing loss of income, to the self-employed and to informal businesses.

Many of these measures are being taken up by both large and small businesses.

The Unemployment Insurance Fund has set aside R40 billion to help employees who will be unable to work, as part of the effort to prevent jobs losses as a result of the lockdown.

To date, it has paid out R356 million.

I would like to applaud all those employers who have continued to pay their workers during this difficult time, as well as those employers who are working with unions and government to assist their employees to access these benefits.

I would like to call on all businesses to continue to pay their suppliers, to the extent that they can, to ensure that those suppliers can also continue to operate and pay their staff and suppliers.

In this respect, I would like to appeal to all large businesses not to resort to force majeure and stop paying their suppliers and rental commitments, as such practice has a domino effect on all other businesses dependent on that chain.

We must do all we can to ensure that the underlying economy continues to function and to focus support on those small businesses that really need them.

The Industrial Development Corporation has set aside R3 billion for the procurement of essential medical supplies.

It has already approved R130 million in funding and expects to approve a further R400 million in the coming week to companies who applied for funding under this special facility.

The Small Enterprise Finance Agency has approved the postponement of loan repayments for a period of 6 months.

The small business debt relief and business growth facilities are currently adjudicating applications for assistance.

There is a total of R500 million available in support.

Government has reprioritised R1.2 billion to provide relief to smallholder farmers and to contribute to the security of food supply.

In addition to these expenditure measures, the Reserve Bank has also lowered interest rates and has taken measures to inject liquidity into the economy.

One of the biggest challenges that all countries in the world are facing is the shortage of medical supplies to fight the coronavirus.

As a country we have had to rely on our own capabilities to supply these goods, but have also had to source supplies from other countries.

In recent weeks, we have seen a massive mobilisation of South African business, labour, academics and government agencies to build the stocks of medical and other equipment needed to fight coronavirus.

We have, for example, established the National Ventilator Project to rapidly mobilise the technical and industrial resources of our country to manufacture non-invasive ventilators, which can be used to support patients afflicted with the disease.

Other projects are focusing on increasing the local manufacture of protective face masks, hand sanitisers and pharmaceutical products which can be used by health care workers and the public at large.

As the third part of our coronavirus response, we have been working to provide basic needs such as water and to maintain the reliability of food supply to the poorest South Africans.

We have also expanded the provision of food parcels and we've provided spaza shops with financial support.

To date, government has delivered over 11,000 water storage tanks to communities in need across the country, and many of these have been installed.

In addition, 1,000 water tankers have been provided for the delivery of water.

Several homeless people have been accommodated in 154 shelters.

I am pleased to report that the Solidarity Fund – which was established to mobilise resources from companies, organisations and individuals to combat the coronavirus pandemic – has so far raised around R2.2 billion.

It has already allocated around R1 billion to buy sterile gloves, face shields, surgical masks, test kits and ventilators.

It will also allocate funds for humanitarian relief to vulnerable households, in addition to the R400 million set aside by government for Social Relief of Distress grants.

All of these efforts, while necessary and commendable, will not be sufficient on their own to cushion the poor from the impact of this pandemic.

Nor will they provide the relief that businesses and their employees require.

Additional extraordinary measures will need to be put in place in the coming weeks and months to absorb the sudden loss of income to both businesses and individuals.

We are in a situation that demands swift action and exceptional methods, a situation that demands innovation and the mobilisation of every resource that we have.

Cabinet will be developing a comprehensive package of urgent economic measures to respond both to the immediate crisis and to the severe economic challenges that we must confront in the months ahead.

Further announcements on the next phase of our economic and social support strategy will be made in due course.

An essential part of our response to this emergency is the principle of solidarity.

From across society, companies and individuals have come forward to provide financial and other assistance.

In support of this effort, we have decided that the President, Deputy President, Ministers and Deputy Ministers will each take a one-third cut in their salaries for the next three months.

This portion of their salaries will be donated to the Solidarity Fund.

We are calling on other public office bearers and executives of large companies to make a similar gesture and to further increase the reach of this national effort.

In this regard, we welcome the donation of 20,000 cellphones by Vodacom for health workers that will be involved in screening and tracing in communities.

As we have stressed before and we will stress once again, our struggle against the coronavirus requires fundamental changes in behaviour from all of us.

Until we have contained the coronavirus, the same rules remain.

Shaking hands, hugging, sitting close to each other and other forms of physical contact enable this virus to be transmitted, and must be avoided.

We must continue to wash our hands regularly and thoroughly using water and soap or sanitiser.

To stay safe and to keep others safe we must continue to respect whatever restrictions that are placed on our movement and on our daily lives

Over the past two weeks, I have been speaking to other African leaders about a coordinated continental effort to combat the coronavirus and support our people and our economies.

We have established an AU COVID-19 Response Fund to mobilise the resources necessary to support this effort.

We have reached out to world leaders, even as they struggle with the pandemic in their countries, to assist the continent with essential medical supplies and to support a comprehensive stimulus package for Africa.

As we confront this disease in our country, we are part of a great global effort that is bringing humanity together in ways that many never thought possible.

For billions across the world, and for us here in South Africa, the coronavirus pandemic has changed everything.

We can no longer work in the way we have before.

As government, as NGOs, as political parties, as large corporations and small businesses, as financial institutions, as community organisations and as South Africans we will need to adapt to a new reality.

As we emerge from this crisis, our country will need to undergo a process of fundamental reconstruction.

To do so, we will draw on our strengths: our abundant natural resources, our advanced infrastructure, our deep financial markets, our proven capabilities in

information and communication technology, and the depth of talent among our people.

We will draw on our proven capacity for innovation and creativity, our ability to come together in a crisis, and our commitment to each other and our common future.

We will learn from global experience and the best scientific evidence, but we will craft a uniquely South African response that uses our own capabilities as a nation.

This weekend is a sacred time for many South Africans.

For many, it will be difficult to spend this time without their friends and family.

I ask that you keep in your thoughts tonight all in our land who are vulnerable, destitute and alone.

I ask that you give what you can to alleviate their burden.

To contribute to the Solidarity Fund in any way you can.

This is a difficult time for us all.

Yet the message of Easter is one we carry in our hearts tonight.

It is the message of hope, of recovery and of rebirth.

As we walk this road together, as we struggle to defeat this pandemic, we remain strong and united and resolved.

Much is being asked of you, far more than should ever be asked.

But we know that this is a matter of survival, and we dare not fail.

We shall recover.

We shall overcome.

May God bless South Africa and protect her people.

I thank you.