

■ COVID-19

Lockdown to be eased, but levels kick in

President outlines phased reopening of SA

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WHILE it is yet unclear when exactly the country's schools will open, President Cyril Ramaphosa has indicated that most regulations restricting the movement of people across the country will continue beyond May 1 when the nationwide lockdown comes to an end.

Ramaphosa was addressing the nation last night on the phased reopening of the economy by his administration, planned to take place when the 35-day national lockdown comes to an end next week.

The phased easing of the lockdown will be implemented through five levels, with the current hard lockdown being level 5, which will be eased to level 4, to gradually resume economic activity.

"We will implement what we call a risk strategy through which we take a deliberate and cautious approach to the easing of lockdown restrictions. We have decided on this approach because there is still much that is unknown about the rate and the manner of the spread of the virus within our own population," said Ramaphosa.

Schools and businesses would be reopened in a phased approach, which would be detailed by relevant ministers.

While the sale of cigarettes would be allowed, the contentious sale of alcohol would continue to be prohibited.

Ramaphosa said the approach was based on advice from scientists who warned that an abrupt lifting of the restrictions could cause a massive resurgence in infections.

"We cannot take action today that we will deeply regret tomorrow. We must avoid a rush to reopening."

Experts, including Professor Salim Abdool Karim, who leads South Africa's 45-person ministerial advisory committee on Covid-19, have warned that a spike in the infections is inevitable.

Karim had indicated that the lockdown had helped the country to buy time and make necessary preparations for responding to the pandemic, but that it was unclear what more the country could reap from it.

Level 3 would involve the easing of some of the restrictions on work and social activities but with some main-

tained to address the high risk of transmissions, while level 2 involved further easing on leisure and social activities.

Level 1 would see most normal activities resumed while maintaining adherence to health and precaution guidelines.

Ramaphosa indicated that there would be a national level of the lockdown and separate levels of lockdown for each province, district and metro in the country – based on infection rate – to ensure that the country's response was precise and targeted.

Different sectors of the economy would also be classified according to the risk of transmission, lockdown impact and economic contribution.

"Some businesses will be allowed to resume operation under specific conditions. Every business will have to adhere to detailed health and safety protocols to protect their employees," Ramaphosa said.

DA interim leader John Steenhuisen said he had called on Ramaphosa, during the virtual meeting with political leaders ahead of his address, to make the wearing of face masks mandatory to ensure that the easing of the lockdown did not result in the sporadic spread of the virus.

"This is particularly important for high-density situations like on public transport and in shops, but should be mandatory in all places where people are not able to keep a 1.5-metre distance," Steenhuisen said.

ANC treasurer-general Paul Mashatile commended Ramaphosa's administration for its response to the pandemic, which has been applauded by the World Health Organisation (WHO).

Mashatile, however, described the expected 6.1% contraction of the country's GDP and potential loss of around 370 000 jobs this year as a result of the pandemic and resultant regulations as deeply concerning.

According to political analyst Protus Madlala, Ramaphosa was compelled to announce the easing of lockdown as the economy was nearer to failing to sustain the poor people workers and hawkers. | **Additional reporting by Sihle Mavuso, Bongani Hans and Mayibongwe Maqhina**