

NEW WAVE ANTICIPATED

Two years on, pandemic 'not over'

KARISHMA DIPA
karishma.dipa@inl.co.za

PROFESSOR Salim Abdool Karim has been on the front line of South Africa's fight against Covid-19 since the virus erupted back in March 2020.

But the first time the world-renowned epidemiologist felt personally scared at the state of the pandemic was in November 2020.

This was when he first received the news of the Beta variant, which would go on to wreak havoc, resulting in widespread infections, record-high hospitalisations and thousands of people losing their lives.

"The day I got really worried about the pandemic was at the end of November 2020 when my colleague, Professor Tulio de Oliveira, showed me the new sequence of the virus and from this information I could see how the virus mutated to what we now refer to as the Beta

variant," Karim said.

"This variant made a critical change that caused us great concern as it was able to escape immunity, and I remember thinking then that everything we were worried about had happened."

Now with the second anniversary of the very first case of the virus reported in South Africa earlier this month, as the country was about to enter two years in lockdown, the director of the Centre for the Aids Programme of Research in South Africa (Caprisa) has reflected on this unprecedented period in the nation's history.

"I can probably describe the past two years in just two words: 'tiring, but also an amazing educational 'opportunity'. I would say it's tiring because everything about this virus is so fast, there is no time to recover, things move at a very fast pace and I feel as though I've lived through ten years during these two years," he admitted.

"But I'd also say that this pandemic



PROFESSOR Salim Abdool Karim. | FILE

offered me incredible educational opportunities, because I have learnt so much. Yet it has also taught me that even though we think we know so much, there is even more to learn."

And while there is room for optimism as the current transmission of the virus in the country remains low and the government is considering a further easing of lockdown restrictions,

Karim warned that the pandemic is not over and that the nation should expect even more challenges in the future. "We must understand that we are living in the midst of a pandemic and that it's not over and we only have to look to Hong Kong to see evidence of that."

This month, the Asian city recorded high levels of Covid-19 infections as well as a high death rate from the virus.

Karim stressed that South Africans should take note of this and not forget the dire consequences of the pandemic.

"We can't ignore this pandemic and it will not be over until it's over everywhere, because we learnt with the Omicron variants that an outbreak in one country can easily spread to others and that one single variant has the ability to slit the entire world."

The Caprisa director added that due to the cyclical nature of the virus

and the way it evolves, new variants drive new waves. "We can anticipate a new wave of the virus around May but this will depend on the emergence of a new variant."

Karim said that while they are able to make predictions on the way the virus behaves, no one knows for sure what will happen next.

"We can expect to still see a few more variants of the virus but we will get to a stage where it will no longer be able to mutate with advantages, and when we get to that point, this will be the variant we will have to live with, but we also don't yet know the severity of this variant."

Despite the uncertain nature of the coronavirus, the epidemiologist believes that South Africa did what it could to react to a virus it had never encountered before. He based this on his time spent on international commissions which looked at different countries' responses to the pandemic.