

COVID-19: WORST 'YET TO COME'

Expert epidemiologist Karim tells of virus trajectory in SA, warns of surge in cases

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SOUTH Africans will know on April 18 if the country's fight against the spread of coronavirus in communities is inaccurate or factually correct.

This was the sentiment shared by epidemiologist Professor Salim Abdool Karim.

The chief adviser to the government on the pandemic described this week as being critical for the country since the outbreak.

He sounded the warning during a briefing with leading scientists and medical experts on Monday night.

"This coming week is critical. We need to know what the average number of cases is going to be. Why? Because we want to know what the community transmission levels are; because we want to use that to guide us on what the next steps to follow are and how we

should manage the lockdown.

"So by April 18 (Saturday) we will know if the community transmission, and whether our interpretation of that community transmission, has been kept low; whether that is accurate," he said.

While Karim hailed the country for successfully delaying the spread of coronavirus, he warned that it would not escape the severity of the epidemic.

According to him, the worst was still to come. "Can SA escape the worst of this epidemic? Is the exponential spread avoidable? The answer, sadly, is that it is very unlikely.

"Put simply, no, we can't escape this epidemic... Our population is at high risk because we have no protective immunity against this virus," he said.

Karim said lifting the lockdown could lead to the resurgence of new infections.

At the end of the lockdown the



PROFESSOR Salim
Abdool Karim.

epidemic was "likely to come back".

"What we hope for is that the number of new cases is on a steady decline and they will eventually disappear and that will be the end of the story. I am sorry to tell you that that is most unlikely. What we have managed to

do is to stem community transmission through the lockdown," he said.

He noted that the virus trajectory in the country was unique when compared with other countries.

"The number of new cases we virtually have in SA was the same as the

number of cases we saw in the UK," he said.

Unlike the UK, which saw a rapid upward surge in coronavirus cases when it reached 100, SA didn't experience "a straight upward exponential curve".

"What you see about the trends in SA is that we were on an upward trajectory. We were entering the exponential curve whereby a number of cases were increasing rapidly.

"On March 26 we took a turn instead of continuing a straight upward exponential curve. March 26 is important because that was a day after lockdown. We reached a stage which we call a plateau whereby we see a similar number of cases every day," he said.

So far, the country was able to implement four stages, which included preparation, primary prevention, a lockdown and surveillance programme and active case finding, Karim said.

The country was entering stage five,

which would include ensuring that all of us follow the lockdown rules and monitor community transmission.

"In a week before we declared the state of disaster we were having two cases per day on average. In the second week we had a rapid increase. We are now talking about 76 cases per day on average," Karim said.

He also warned that "if we end the lockdown abruptly we run the risk of undoing the work we have achieved because then we will be putting high-risk and low-risk people together".

He said it was important to continue to delay the spread as a way to prepare for the worst.

"If we allow it to grow unchecked we will see what is going on in New York.

We will see thousands of people trying to get into hospital for care and we simply don't have the ICU care," Karim said.