

South Africa starts easing coronavirus lockdown

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South Africa began to gradually ease its strict coronavirus lockdown on Friday, allowing some industries to reopen after five weeks of restrictions that plunged its struggling economy deeper into turmoil.

Africa's most industrialised nation was already teetering with low growth and high debts when the lockdown kicked in on March 27.

On Wednesday S&P downgraded the country's credit rating further to junk.

"The poor and the working class are having to bear the burden of a global pandemic that has caused severe economic and social disruption," President Cyril Ramaphosa said in a televised May Day speech, adding that pre-existing challenges had been "exacerbated by the pandemic".

"As we begin the process of easing the lockdown and many people start returning to work, we must remain vigilant and careful," Ramaphosa cautioned.

"The road ahead will be long and hard, and we will make mistakes."

With 5,647 confirmed cases and 103 fatalities, South Africa has the continent's highest COVID-19 death toll.

But a mid-April government survey published on Friday showed that respondents were more concerned about a potential economic collapse

than contracting coronavirus.

Many also feared the outbreak would trigger civil disorder in a country marred by social inequality and sporadic outbursts of xenophobic violence.

'Very difficult battle'

"Our president ... has got a very difficult battle with managing livelihoods and economic issues together with health issues," Paul Kapelus, a development specialist cycling at a Johannesburg park, said in the early hours of the first day of the eased restrictions.

Around 1.5 million workers in selected industries will return to work in the next phase under strict health conditions, according to Trade and Industry Minister Ebrahim Patel.

Winter clothing, textile and packaging manufacturing were among the industries permitted to reopen factories from Friday.

Restaurants also opened only for takeaway deliveries but controversial bans on the sale of cigarettes and alcohol remained.

Social distancing and wearing masks in public and at workplaces will be mandatory.

Small freedoms

Some outdoor activities such as cycling, walking and running commenced on Friday—but for just three hours in the morning.

Construction company owner and jogger Sean Lawrenson woke up at the

crack of dawn for his first run in weeks in the northern Johannesburg suburb of Emmarentia, home to one of the city's most stunning parks.

"Gosh I forgot how beautiful it was, how much I missed it. It felt great," Lawrenson said, wearing a protective black face mask and beanie.

But "running in a mask is pretty tough. I think I'm going to use a buffer tomorrow."

For the 50-year old cyclist Paul Kapelus, "the most important thing is that my wife is happy that I'm out of the house."

As the economy slowly reopened, South Africans were grateful for the small freedoms they could not enjoy under strict lockdown.

In downtown Hillbrow, a few people were spotted exercising by running up and down a steep road.

"If I am not running I am not feeling well," said Reason Nyamvura as he completed an impressive set of squat jumps and drills.

'Our people need to eat'

Ramaphosa took the decision to stagger the easing of the lockdown restrictions to strike a balance between protecting public health and the economy.

"Our people need to eat. They need to earn a living," Ramaphosa said.

"Companies need to be able to produce and to trade, they need to generate revenue and keep their employees in employment."

To help cushion companies and individuals, Ramaphosa last week

unveiled an unprecedented half-a-trillion rand (\$26.9 billion) economic stimulus and social relief package, amounting to about 10 percent of GDP.

Finance Minister Tito Mboweni said the country will seek coronavirus relief aid from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.

The lockdown has had a devastating impact on the economy, but a top government adviser on the pandemic said it has slowed transmissions.

"We have got quite clear evidence that we have flattened the curve," infectious disease epidemiologist Salim Abdool Karim told AFP.

"The number of cases we are seeing—and the number of infections probably occurring—has declined quite substantially."

While the World Health Organization has commended South Africa for acting swiftly, it has called for caution in easing coronavirus controls.

"Lockdowns are being eased in some parts of Africa, but we cannot just revert back to how things were before the outbreak," said Dr. Matshidiso Moeti, the World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Director for Africa.

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