

# President Mnangagwa's Speech on Extension of Lockdown

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Fellow Zimbabweans, some 21 days ago, I, as your President, announced Government decision to put our nation on lockdown as part of our broad response to the virulent, world-wide threat of coronavirus. In arriving at that decision, Government took into account the few cases which had already hit us then, as well as the global spread of the virus which swelled at an alarming rate daily.

Today as I address you, more than 2,3 million people have been infected worldwide with Covid-19, with at least 160 000 having succumbed to the disease. Our continent of Africa has reported more than 18 000 cases, with 348 deaths having been recorded.

The latest report from the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, UNECA, cuts a very grim picture for our Continent. It says Africa could see anything between 300 000 and 3,3 million deaths due to the pandemic, with infections likely to reach millions in less than two months from now.

Considering that Africa confirmed its first case just over two months ago, on February 14, it should be very clear the Continent risks losing to the virus should there be any let up on the drastic measures most countries have now taken.

Coming to our own country, we have witnessed a spiking of infections from single digits to the current 25, with three of our loved ones already dead. Apart from this growing number of infections, we are deeply worried that the virus is beginning to attack our children, with more and more cases coming from local transmissions.

Clearly the numbers are rising, and will soon gallop uncontrollably once we reach the deadly mark of 100, after which the grim multiplier effect kicks in.

Once the cases begin to grow exponentially, the strain on our health facilities will be huge. We should thus do our best now, to ensure the pandemic levels off at these, low, manageable numbers we currently have recorded.

Indeed we should treat the current small numbers of infections as a window of opportunity to tighten our collective national defences, while providing for the worst case scenario of a full-blown health crisis. This, your Government has, and continues to do, within the limited means and constraints it has.

From the very beginning, we have always known that a National Lockdown cannot be the cure, the solution. Rather, it merely buys time for us to slow down transmissions, while we take other measures and prepare on many fronts, to cope and deal with the pandemic.

Equally, we have always been conscious of the huge costs which come with a total national lockdown: to the economy, to livelihoods, to families, to individuals and to all our children whose normal lives full of play and learning today stand severely curtailed. But we chose the route of abundant caution, whatever costs and discomforts this route brings upon our whole society.

Nothing is more important than life saving.

I have already said the lockdown is not the panacea; it is only a holding operation while we seek real, durable solutions. I want to spend some time explaining our country strategy, which if carried out successfully, becomes our exit strategy from this otherwise engulfing danger, and of course from the painful measures which this danger has necessitated.

Let me emphasise that the national lockdown cannot, in itself, be the strategy. Nor can it last forever. Our national strategy must be founded on, firstly, levelling the pandemic by arresting its spread in the immediate. While we do that, we should take measures that place us ahead of infections so we hold the disease at bay, while a cure and vaccines are being found and developed respectively.

Government has now moved beyond diagnosing cases which present themselves for investigation. This reactive and remedial response clearly comes short of the goal of staying ahead of the virus.

Government has now embarked upon expanded tests covering our whole country. This allows us to gauge the magnitude of the problem, while promptly isolating cases early enough from the onset of the virus, and before more and more people are infected through contact or community transmissions.

This broad, proactive approach, allows us to detect asymptomatic cases which, as we now know, could very well be more deadly since the carrier shows no symptoms. In practical terms, this means making available more test kits to more centres countrywide so every citizen is within reach of testing services.

Secondly, it means re-purposing all our institutions, principally health institutions, our industries and our research centres and laboratories. With time and before long, all our health institutions, right down to small, remote rural clinics, must become testing centres.

It also means we have to increase our laboratories countrywide, to ensure results of expanded tests come soon enough to allow for timeous interventions.

We thus need a competent cadre across the whole health value chain. This means more recruitments, more specialised training and retraining so our hardworking health workers know how to play their part in the fight against Covid-19, without putting themselves in harm's way.

Our industries and tertiary institutions must be repurposed so they can make significant contributions to this new thrust. By way of critical skills and services; and by way of more and better equipment and consumables we require for this national effort.

Over the past few weeks, I have held several meetings with different professionals and business interests, in order to mobilise our Nation towards this new campaign. The results have been salutary and I am quite confident we are geared for better outcomes.

Contact tracing comes hard on the heels of testing and treatment. We need to account for all persons who would have come in contact with all infected persons.

Experts tell me that an ideal situation is devoting one contact tracer to every four infected cases. Tracing and isolation limits the multiplier effect of the pandemic. It also allows early treatment, which lightens the burden on our facilities of care. We have to ginger up our infection surveillance systems for speedy detections and contact tracing. Again, Government is addressing this critical area.

Thirdly, as I address you, more of our health institutions are being repurposed to handle the pandemic. The goal is to increase the number of beds for Covid-19 cases, in anticipation of increased infections. We have to have on standby more and more, well-equipped and stocked facilities, which are competent enough to deal with any upsurge in infections.

We require more health personnel who can discharge their already onerous care-and-cure duties, knowing full well that they are well provided for and protected.

This means adequate Personal Protection Equipment (PPEs), so we do not lose our committed health cadres while in the line of duty. Government will stop at nothing to ensure our institutions are fully equipped and stocked, and in ensuring our health personnel are fully kitted and motivated.

From the foregoing, three objectives become apparent:

1. We must flatten and then arrest the infection curve;
2. We must raise the line of tests through expanded testing and,
3. We must see more Covid-19 recoveries so our health institutions are not overburdened.

Fellow Zimbabweans, the three-week national lockdown which has been underway ordinarily expires at midnight. Government has reviewed the situation obtaining in the country, around us in the region and worldwide. As I have already indicated, incidences of infection in our country to date have risen to 25.

This figure comprises both imported and local transmissions, with the trend clearly showing that more and more, we are now dealing with in-country transmissions. We are also facing a new situation where more and more of our citizens are coming back home, including from countries heavily affected by the Covid-19 pandemic.

This presents an unavoidable, but growing threat to our nation, as we must accommodate all our returning citizens.

The country is yet to meet the conditions for lifting the lockdown that were recently announced by WHO. Key among these conditions is the need to have in place health systems that are capable to test, isolate, treat and trace every contact. The need to lift the lockdown or restrictions is when the transmission of the virus is fairly under control.

As I have also already indicated, worldwide cases of infections continue to gallop, with the World Health Organisation counselling against relaxing lockdowns currently adopted by almost all countries of the world.

Guided by these realities, and to allow ourselves greater leeway to prepare for worse times which are likely ahead, Government has decided to extend with immediate effect the national lockdown by a further 14 days. That means the national lockdown which would have expired at midnight stands extended by another two weeks up to 3rd May, 2020.

It has been a very hard decision my Government has had to take reluctantly. But it has been a necessary and unavoidable decision in the circumstances in which we find ourselves. We need to maintain the same level of national and self-restraint, as we have shown in the three weeks which have gone by, all in the interest of our nation and of ourselves individually.

Government is acutely aware of the need to keep the Economy running, all-be-it at subdued levels. With this objective in mind, Government has decided to allow the mining sector to resume or scale up operations, even then within parameters set by the World Health Organisation regarding social distancing and other public health safety measures.

I have now directed the Ministries of Health and Child Care, and that of Mines and Mining Development to work closely to ensure the workforce in the mining sector is immediately screened and tested ahead of resumed operations.

Further, to the extent possible I have directed that workers in the mining sector remain within the precincts of their accommodation at workplaces for the duration of the lockdown.

In respect of our manufacturing sector, I have further directed that limited operations resume in the national interest, but mindful of the public health safeguards as already announced. Inspectors will be visiting all operations to ensure these safeguards are being strictly adhered to.

This reprieve covers our manufacturers in our informal sector and SMEs as well, who have to use these two weeks to rebuild their capacities and stocks. The responsible ministry is also directed to work closely with the Health authorities to ensure there is order and safety in that sector so critical to livelihoods. As Government, we continue to explore ways of mitigating the impact of the lockdown on all businesses, big and small, so our economy recovers more rapidly, after the pandemic.

Essential services continue as before, operating within designated times and parameters as already announced. I am happy that the Department of Social Welfare has begun rolling out support schemes and measures targeting vulnerable families throughout the country.

These measures which include cash disbursements will be fine-tuned and intensified so needy families are supported throughout the period of the National Lockdown. Our security arms will step in to assist, including facilitating essential movements of our citizens during this difficult period.

I shall be visiting a few more places, both in towns and cities, and in our rural areas, to see first-hand how families are coping, and what extra measures we need to take as Government to make the burden of the National Lockdown bearable.

Fellow Zimbabweans, the Second Republic is a listening, a caring Dispensation. We continue to listen to any suggestions you might have as citizens so we make our responses to Covid-19 both effective and bearable.

Once again, I would like to thank you all for the high level of self-discipline you have shown in the three weeks we have been under National Lockdown. I trust and hope that this will continue for the next two weeks after which Government will announce an appropriate way forward, of course guided by realities on the ground.

Together, we will win against the pandemic.

I wish you all and your families good health.

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