

■ CRITICAL

Week of high risk

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SOUTH Africans will know by the end of this week if the country's fight against the spread of coronavirus in communities is factually correct or not.

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 the most critical since the outbreak. He sounded the warning during a briefing with leading scientists and medical experts on Monday.

"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 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," 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 South Africa 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 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 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 South Africa was the same as the number of cases we saw in the UK."

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

"What you see about the trends here 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.

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".