

# How SA is taming Covid-19 storm

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No room to relax but signs of pandemic easing raise hopes

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● SA is finally seeing a glimmer of light at the end of the Covid-19 tunnel.

A steady decline in the infection rate and other critical indicators have raised hopes that the worst of the pandemic's first wave is over and that a relaxation of lockdown regulations could come as early as this week, after Tuesday's meeting of the National Coronavirus Command Council (NCCC).

President Cyril Ramaphosa is expected to address the nation no later than Saturday, when the state of disaster he declared in March is due to expire.

Even as SA passed the grim milestone of 10,000 deaths last night, experts said there are strong signs that the Western Cape, Gauteng and the Eastern Cape have seen their surge.

They warned, however, that KwaZulu-Natal has yet to reach its peak, and professor Salim Abdool Karim, head of health minister Zweli Mkhize's advisory committee on the outbreak, said he is "very worried" about his home province.

"If the epidemic really takes off in KZN like what we saw in Gauteng, the number of cases is going to start going up. Everything is dependent on what happens in KZN this week," he said.

The most dramatic sign that SA is over the worst is the number of daily infections,

which has almost halved since peaking at 13,944 on July 24. And the feared overwhelming of medical facilities, which the lockdown was designed to prevent, has not occurred.

The Nasrec field hospital in Gauteng is only half full, a field hospital in Cape Town is being dismantled and shipped to the Eastern Cape, and KwaZulu-Natal hospitals should be able to cope, Mkhize said this week.

Experts are crediting SA's strict and early lockdown for the declining infection rate. In another positive sign, the recovery rate rose above 70% this week, helped by the use of dexamethasone, which has reduced intensive care deaths by a quarter since it was introduced on June 16.

Mkhize said: "What we have seen in the past few months has been a very different presentation of the Covid-19 pandemic from what we initially thought it would be. We initially thought it would be a huge surge in the entire country, with Gauteng recording the most cases."

He warned of the possibility of a second wave, however, and urged South Africans to stay on guard.

"Whilst we are cautiously optimistic, it is still too early for us to make definite conclusions regarding the observed decline. We need to continue to track all these indicators and ensure that our testing capacity reflects a realistic picture of our epidemiological status," he said.

Hinting at a possible relaxation of lockdown regulations, Mkhize said: "We will table recommendations to the [NCCC]. Next week we should be able to get some guidance from the NCCC and the president on the next steps."

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