

ONE YEAR ON

From Patient Zero to vaccinations

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A TRIP to Italy and a tweet from the health minister around this time last year sent the country into a tail-spin.

Health Minister Zweli Mkhize tweeted: "Fellow South Africans.

"This morning, Thursday, March 5, the National Institute for Communicable Diseases confirmed that a suspected case of Covid-19 has tested positive."

With Patient Zero in KZN, the country entered an unknown era but experts and the government attempted to rein in the chaos and confusion.

President Cyril Ramaphosa declared that as the clock struck midnight on March 26, the country would be placed in lockdown and in a National State of Disaster, which was regulated and legitimised by the Disaster Management Act.

The initial lockdown was set to last 21 days albeit extensions were made with today being lockdown day 345.

Throughout the lockdown and its shifts from levels 5 to 1, criticism and challenges were abundant with some deeming it unconstitutional while experts lauded government for its decisive action to curb the spread of the virus.

Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma, Co-operative Governance and Traditional Affairs Minister, along with Ramaphosa have been raked over the legal coals for the lockdown.

Last year, Judge Norman Davis of the North Gauteng High Court in Pretoria, ruled in favour of Reyno de Beer and his Liberty Fighters Network's May application when he declared several of the level 5 and 4 regulations at the time as being irrational.

However, last month Davis ruled against De Beer's application to have the extension of the National State of Disaster and its regulations declared invalid.

The lockdown would be remembered for its economic implications and the two bans, which frequently had citizens taking to social media while big business took to the courts.

The respective bans on tobacco and alcohol were instituted at the onset of the lockdown.

Currently, there was no tobacco ban but the imposing of the alcohol ban fluctuated with teetotaler Police Minister Bheki Cele being a strong supporter of it.

Fair Trade Independent Tobacco Association (Fita) and British American Tobacco SA were driving forces in legal action against the ban.

This month, Dlamini Zuma was granted leave to appeal the Western Cape High Court's ruling that the tobacco ban was unconstitutional and invalid.

Leave to appeal was granted because two court rulings on the ban had differed granting grounds for the matter to proceed to the Supreme Court of Appeal. The first ruling regarded Fita's ban battle but the court fell in favour of the ban, ruling that it met reasonability and necessity tests for government to put it in place.

However, the Western Cape High Court ruling against the ban, four months later, found that it did not meet the proportionality test.

SA Revenue Service commissioner Edward Kieswetter, has said billions in revenue was lost from excise taxes for alcohol and tobacco during the lockdown and bans. Other regulations that have been contested are the visiting of beaches and the restrictions on gatherings.

"Essential service" was a buzzword



PROFESSOR Salim Abdool Karim in the Caprisa boardroom at UKZN's medical school. | ZANELE ZULU African News Agency (ANA)



LWAZI Nene was contracted by the Department of Basic Education at Ogwini High School in uMlazi, to sanitise classrooms for the reopening of schools. | ZANELE ZULU African News Agency (ANA)

thrown around which meant only a select few like health-care practitioners, law enforcement and members of the media were permitted to wade through the police roadblocks, SANDF patrols and operate beyond curfew with the necessary permits and paperwork.

The knock-on effect meant that hotels, retail stores, local eateries, small family businesses, religious institutions and schools were shut down.

Unemployment lines lengthened, personal debt ballooned and the desperation to put food on the table grew, but after two months a reprieve was felt when Ramaphosa announced that restriction easements would begin from May 1.

After three months and a week's delay as education minister Angie Motshekga announced schools would open on June 8.

There was a staggered approach to avoid all grades being present at the same time. This, however, was met

by fervour and fear from teachers, parents and unions who were unsure about their safety. But they made it through with matric results recently being released and schools have just reopened.

National Education spokesperson Elijah Mhlanga has said the previous year was tough but filled with lessons for a better future.

Throughout it all the government has been guided by the ministerial advisory committee on Covid-19 which was formed in March and chaired by Professor Salim Abdool Karim.

In September he was later joined by his co-chairperson Professor Marian Jacobs when the MAC expanded with one of the new branches focusing on vaccines that was chaired by Professor Barry Schoub.

The committee included a range of scientific, medical, economic, social, traditional and religious experts to provide high-level advice which has ranged from lockdown regulations to drugs like ivermectin.

The National Joint Operational and Intelligence Structure and National Coronavirus Command Council are the entities responsible for the country's Covid-19 battle plans.

They have guided the country through some of its toughest times most recently being the second wave of infections which began in December.

It saw grim records being broken when compared to the first peak which was during June and July.

During the second wave, data from the South African Medical Research Council showed the week of December 30 to January 5 recorded the highest death tally of 20063 citizens.

What the country faced was a new variant, 501Y.V2, which was discovered by the KwaZulu-Natal Research Innovation and Sequencing Platform in Nelson Mandela Bay, which has now taken the globe by storm.

It is the country's dominant variant and the driving force behind the second wave.

The country entered into a new phase of its response – vaccination.

After the kerfuffle with the Astra-Zeneca vaccine which was found to have lowered efficacy levels and was soon to expire, the country entered into an agreement to roll-out out the Johnson & Johnson single jab vaccine through the clinical study known as the Sisonke Programme. So far, over 100000 front-line health-care workers have been vaccinated.

The fight was ongoing with a potential third wave and new variants on the horizon, so mask-wearing, sanitising and physical distancing remain the order of the day.



POLICE and the SANDF at a roadblock uMlazi, Durban during the lockdown. | ZANELE ZULU African News Agency (ANA)



DOCTORS who are mothers and who ran Prince Mshiyeni Hospital's Covid Unit jumped for joy after being vaccinated. From left is Leosha Baldeo, Thevaloshni Naidoo, Nerika Maharaj and Michelle Rajkaran. | ZANELE ZULU African News Agency (ANA)