

EDITORIAL

How much worse can this all get?

WE LIVE in disturbing times. The coronavirus situation is increasingly concerning but so, too, is the economic and social devastation caused by the national lockdown.

The public has clearly had enough of oppressive rules, and who can blame people for feeling demoralised when we read reports of those with political connections benefiting from the crisis with inflated tenders for PPE which is in short supply?

From starting off the fight against Covid-19 with so much promise, South Africa now has more than half the cases on the continent and is in the top 5 globally – not records we can be proud of. We have more than 500 000 confirmed cases of Covid-19, and more than 8 000 deaths as we enter the peak period of the pandemic.

Yet, just when we should be up for the fight, we are fatigued and have a sense of hopelessness and loss of trust in our government as the extended lockdown, now entering its fifth month, takes its toll financially and emotionally.

The president missed an opportunity to address us last weekend and instead issued a statement in which he reminded us, among other things, that the situation could have been worse. How much worse, we must ask, when we add to the deaths from Covid-19 the hunger, unemployment and desperation caused by lockdown? How much worse, we must ask, when there is growing evidence of looting of Covid-19 funds intended to equip doctors and nurses in our hospitals?

On Monday in his weekly letter, President Cyril Ramaphosa described corruption during a national disaster as “a particularly heinous type of crime”. How, he asked, does one understand the “lack of conscience” that leads a businessperson to profit from a disaster, a councillor to stockpile emergency food parcels or a family to steal funds for unemployed workers? How indeed? He described profiting from the current health crisis as being like a pack of hyenas circling wounded prey, and he has promised to go after those “hyenas”.

Professor Salim Abdool Karim, chairperson of the government advisory committee, has prescribed a dose of ubuntu as our best chance of defeating Covid-19. But how should ordinary people who are outraged and let down by what is happening be expected to embrace qualities of virtue, compassion and humanity when around them what they see is greed and indifference to their suffering?

How are we to fight this pandemic, or indeed survive its aftermath against the backdrop of patronage and a culture of impunity?

Do we believe that this time it will be different and those responsible will get their comeuppance?