

Covid cloud over Xmas

Surge in Eastern Cape could trigger second wave in the new year

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● Top Covid-19 experts have warned that unless the resurgence in Nelson Mandela Bay is contained immediately, SA risks spending January engulfed in a second wave of the pandemic.

The warning comes amid a surge of cases in Nelson Mandela Bay, and ahead of hundreds of thousands of people travelling across the country for the festive season.

The mass migration began this weekend, when thousands of matric pupils headed for coastal towns to celebrate the end of exams, despite warnings from medical experts that these parties are super spreader events.

Officials in the Eastern Cape city have gone into emergency mode, with proposals to halt the on-site consumption of alcohol at taverns and pubs, extend the curfew and reduce the permitted size of social gatherings. These proposals are expected to be made to the National Coronavirus Command Council (NCCC) next week.

Widespread disregard for safety protocols has been blamed for the outbreak in Nelson Mandela Bay, which now accounts for more than 50% of SA's total daily infections.

In less than a month, the daily number of Covid-19 cases in the municipality grew from 103 to 765. By Thursday, there were 4,526 active cases and 1,647 deaths. Total cases stand at over 40,000.

Though hospitals still have capacity, health workers are "exhausted, stressed and frustrated", according to the chair of the South African Medical Association (Sama), Dr Angelique Coetzee.

The head of the Covid-19 ministerial advisory committee, professor Salim Abdool Karim, said if the Covid-19 resurgence in Nelson Mandela Bay is not contained immediately, the country risks spending January engulfed in a second wave.

"I am worried about December 16, when the factories close and hundreds of thousands of people travel across the country, some of them to the Eastern Cape. Three weeks later when the holidays are over they will be taking the virus throughout the country," he said.

"Unfortunately the Eastern Cape health department does not have the kind of capability that we see in many of our provinces. They could not quell the outbreak. It was not controlled adequately and, before we knew it, had spread. The way to stop a national outbreak is to get the Eastern Cape situation under control now."

Professor Mosa Moshabela, chief medical specialist of rural health and dean of the University of KwaZulu-Natal's School of Nursing and Public Health, concurred: "We are witnessing a second surge localised to the Eastern Cape currently, and spreading through-

out the province. "This will likely trigger a surge in the Western Cape and Gauteng. Gauteng will trigger all other provinces after the holidays, towards the end of January, and through February and March."

Moshabela said a limit on travel could be an early precaution.

"If fewer people travel, and fewer people to the Eastern Cape, then there is a chance we might limit the spread. Those who opt to travel should avoid gatherings. They should also self-quarantine for seven to 10 days, and follow standard preventive measures."

Moshabela said the Western Cape and Eastern Cape are feeding each other with infections, given the amount of movement between the provinces.

Health minister Zweli Mkhize held a meeting in Port Elizabeth on Friday with local business and political leaders.

He denied there were talks about placing the metro under heavier restrictions, but an ANC leader in the region said Mkhize's meeting with the business community had agreed that the area should move back to level 3 of lockdown regulations.

"The decision was welcomed even by taverners. The initial thinking by the minister was that we move to level 4. But the meeting reached a compromise that we should move to level 3. This means all taverns will have to close down. They will be no on-

site drinking and a stricter curfew will be introduced. The details will be finalised by the NCCC."

Mkhize told reporters on Friday: "No decision has been taken about putting Nelson Mandela Bay on level 3. We are looking at what needs to be done in terms of restrictions that will help to support our facilities as well as reinforce [compliance] in the community. We

will be able to announce that once a decision has been taken."

He said his department is communicating with the Western Cape government regarding the management of the Garden Route.

Nelson Mandela Bay acting mayor Thsonono Buyeye said a final decision will be made in about a week.

"We need drastic measures ... we are a city in very big trouble," said Buyeye.

Suggestions on how to curb the infection rate in the metro have been made, he said.

"Some of these decisions include increasing the curfew from 12am-4am to 10pm-4am. This is because of the challenge around law enforcement and policing of regulations. Taverns and nightclubs close at [midnight], which means people, when they leave, automatically violate the curfew."

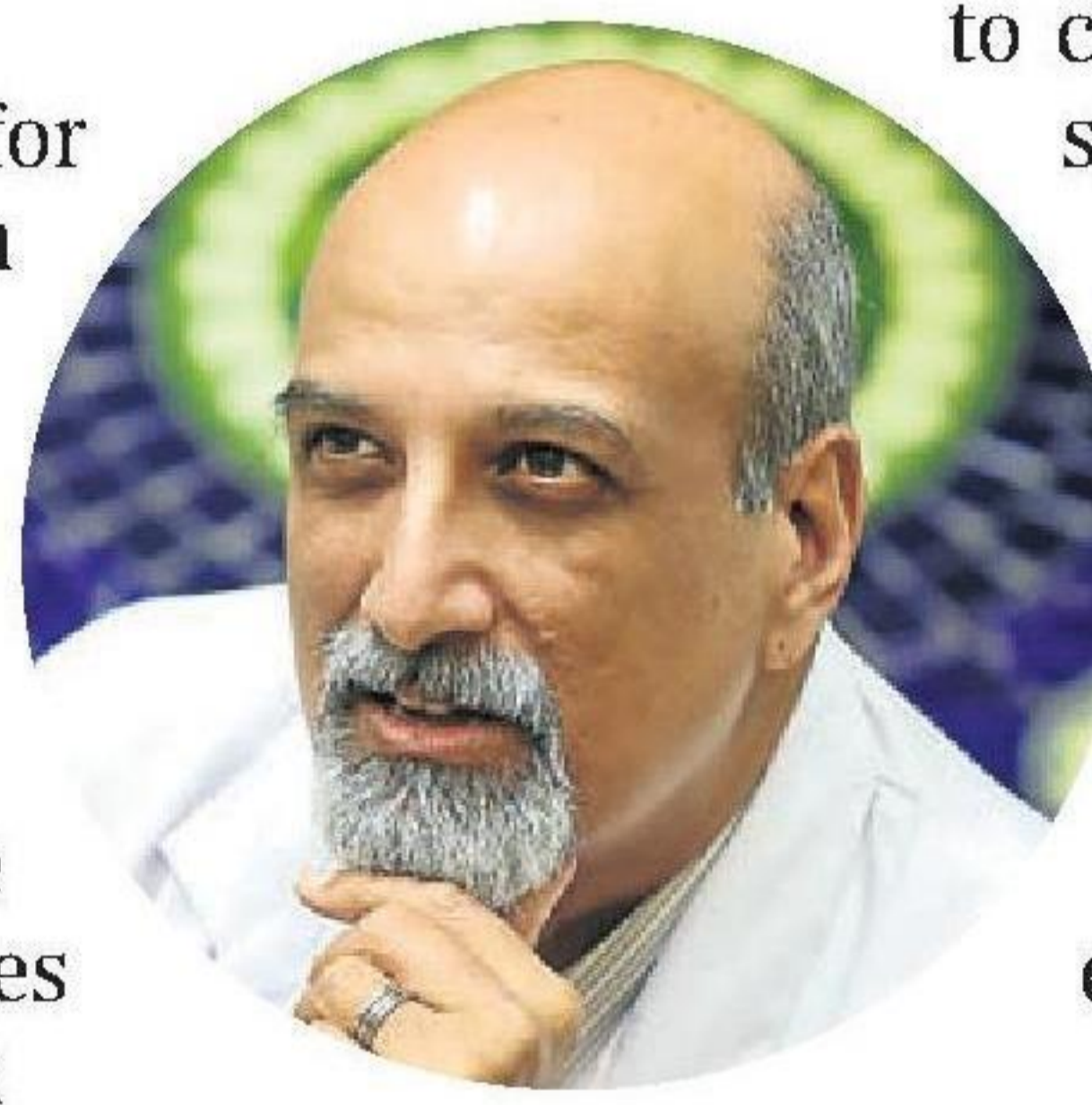
He said tavern owners have proposed that customers be stopped from consuming alcohol on site and that taverns only sell alcohol for off-site consumption.

"Tavern owners are really worried. Many of them are apparently dying."

Buyeye said another suggestion is that social gathering numbers be reduced.

"Gatherings and social get-togethers, like funerals and nightclubs, are super spreaders. The [upper limit] of 100 is not working."

He said it is very difficult to say exactly why the metro's residents are not complying



Salim Abdool Karim