

EDITORIALS

The voices of reason give a glimmer of hope

The ANC government sometimes seems to have a dramatic split personality at times of crisis. So, while some ministers froth at the mouth about the ban on cigarettes and booze and threaten to destroy shebeens if they're selling liquor, you also see the reasoned, capable side of our administration.

And while the former fills us with despair at times, the latter gives us the sort of optimism you get from knowing that this country has the ability to rise to the occasion.

In response to some muted criticism from the media and others about the lack of full information around the coronavirus disaster, the government on Monday evening rolled out their experts who took us into their confidence.

In the process, the government achieved two things: it brought a sense of calm to many about why the lockdown had been extended and showed that the people making decisions about where we go are as good as anyone else in the world.

Fronted by world-renowned HIV/Aids researcher and infectious diseases expert Professor Salim Abdool Karim, the presentation was sobering and realistic, but at the same time offered vital glimmers of hope.

Karim noted that South Africa has a "unique epidemic trajectory" and that this could be due to a number of things, including the quick and early reaction by government in closing borders and enforcing lockdown and social distancing.

He said this country's comparatively low numbers (at a similar stage of progression of the virus) were not due to the low numbers of tests being performed. Daily infections had declined even as testing was ramping up, he said.

The daily number of new infections is the key to deciding whether or not to extend the lockdown. So far, the restrictions have seen those numbers declining significantly ... although not enough to justify lifting the lockdown completely or immediately.

Karim highlighted the house-to-house tests and screenings, which has just started, with 28 000 community health workers to be deployed. Very few countries have done this and it will help identify infection "hot spots", as well as tracking and tracing of contacts.

The lockdown has, effectively, bought us time – some weeks more than if we had done nothing, said Karim. This enabled the government to acquire vital medical stocks, including ventilators and personal protective equipment for medical workers.

It has also given breathing space to permit the construction of emergency quarantine medical facilities, as well as "pop-up" triage points where initial assessments will be done.

However, Karim warned that, successful as we may seem currently, there is no way this country will escape that "exponential growth" in both infections and deaths which has characterised the pandemic elsewhere.

It was comforting to hear that Karim and the team of experts advising the government are also acutely aware of the damage which can be done not only to the economy but, as a consequence, to the health of especially poor South Africans. So, they are looking carefully at balancing those risks with the broader threat posed by the virus.

The bottom line for all of us: the lockdown and its extension were unavoidable.

The government appears to be doing its best for all of us. It is now our civic duty to obey the rules.