

STATE OF DISASTER

Business, industry rejoice as end of lockdown looms

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THE national state of disaster, along with lockdown restrictions, is expected to end on March 15, with business sectors rejoicing at the prospect of a return to "normal".

In his State of the Nation Address, President Cyril Ramaphosa said the recent lockdown extension made last Friday would be the final extension, bringing to an end the two-year-long state of disaster, which many industries have bemoaned due to lost revenue.

Epidemiologist and former chair of the Covid-19 ministerial advisory committee, Professor Salim Abdool Karim, said it signified an adaptive response to the pandemic by the government.

"We have learnt over two years about the virus and how to combat it, so just as Covid-19 evolves so should our responses. We know that waves occur every three months and since we are in a break before the fifth wave, now is a good time to end the lockdown," he said.

Although the lockdown would end, Abdool Karim recommended that four regulations remain in effect. "Large indoor gatherings should still be limited; those involved in congregate gatherings like schools and prisons should all be vaccinated; masks should be worn inside; and, there should be continuous monitoring of the population in order to remain aware of the latest on the pandemic."

Rob Hutchinson, managing director of lobbyist group DearSA, said industries had been crippled, businesses forced to close and thousands lost their jobs as a result of the lockdown. "We are going to pursue legal action in order to set a precedent that government does not have so much power over the lives of citizens and the country as a whole."

Rosemary Anderson, national chair of the Federated Hospitality Association of SA, said the lifting of all restrictions under the state of disaster that

affected hospitality and tourism negatively was a step in the right direction.

"The industry needs as much help as it can get to try to start to recover. This includes the damaging PCR test for all inbound travel into the country. The compulsory test discourages international tourism to our shores since it adds stress, uncertainty and is logistically difficult to organise within a restricted time period."

Speaking on behalf of the flight industry, Kirby Gordon from FlySafair said the end of the state of disaster was a great indication that the country was moving into a recovery phase.

"Our industry was hard hit during periods of more severe restriction and curfews. Fortunately, those periods have been behind us for a while now. We look forward to playing our part in rebuilding the country's economy."

The Restaurant Association of SA had not responded to media requests for comment at the time of publishing.

Health Minister Joe Phaahla said the fifth wave was likely to strike in winter, or earlier, which ultimately put the ball in the population's court on minimising its impact. He placed a high emphasis on vaccinations as they remained the main weapon in the country's arsenal against Covid-19.

Phaahla was optimistic about progress in reaching the new target of having 70% of the population vaccinated by June.

South Africa is currently using the Pfizer-BioNTech and the Johnson & Johnson vaccines. However, on Friday, the SA Health Products Regulatory Authority (Sahpra) authorised the use of the anti-viral medication Molnupiravir for the treatment of infected adults who do not require supplemental oxygen, but are at risk of progression to severe Covid-19.

Sahpra chief executive Boitumelo Semete said a clinical trial showed Molnupiravir reduced the risk of hospitalisation or death, but only when treatment was initiated within five days of the first Covid-19 symptoms.