



health

Department:
Health
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA



Date:	9 July 2021		
To:	The Honourable Ms M.T. Khubayi, Acting Minister of Health	From:	Ministerial Advisory Committee (MAC) on COVID-19

EXTENSION OF LEVEL 4 RESTRICTIONS BEYOND 11 JULY 2021

Problem Statement

The Minister of Co-operative Governance and Traditional Affairs declared an Adjusted Level 4 level of alert in terms of the Disaster Management Act (Act 57 of 2002) on 27 June 2021 (Government Notice No. 564, Government Gazette No. 44772). Adjusted Level 4 restrictions were imposed from 28 June 2021. The Regulations issued in terms of section 27(2) of the Act were amended by Government Notice No. R565, on the same day. The President announced, also on 27 June 2021, that the enhanced restrictions would be in place for 14 days (<https://www.gov.za/speeches/president-cyril-ramaphosa-south-africas-response-coronavirus-covid-19-pandemic-27-jun-2021>). That period therefore ends on Sunday 11 July 2021.

Task to Committee

The MAC on COVID-19 was asked to advise on the appropriate level of restrictions to be applied from 11 July 2021.

Background

The intention of enhanced Alert Level restrictions is primarily to limit the spread of SARS-CoV-2 by reducing interaction between people and enforcing the implementation of non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs), such as mask-wearing and social distancing. Limitations are placed on population movement and gatherings of various types, such as funerals, vigils, sporting events, and political and traditional community meetings. Curfews are imposed, restricting movement outside of the home during specified hours. In an attempt to reduce the load on hospital services associated with trauma, restrictions are also imposed on the sale, dispensing and transportation of alcoholic beverages.

Evidence review

The primary question that needs to be answered is whether the epidemiological position which pertained at the time that Adjusted Level 4 restrictions were imposed has changed to such an extent that relaxation of the Alert Level can safely and responsibly be considered. While the immediate question relates to the situation now (and at 11 July 2021), consideration must be given to the short term forecast (the next 2 weeks) and the medium term (2 to 6 weeks). The South African COVID-19 Modelling Consortium (SACMC) National COVID-19 Epi Model (NCEM v5.2) incorporates updated seroprevalence estimates from all available surveys, data on the spread of the Delta variant and vaccine coverage, to model outcomes under five scenarios, differentiated by individual behaviour, the effects of COVID-19 fatigue, and nationally directed restrictions. The MAC on COVID-19 has reviewed the modelling performed by the SACMC, which makes the following observations and forecasts:

1. The immediate situation

- All provinces, apart from KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) currently meet the definition for being in the third wave. However, incidence of COVID-19 in KZN is already increasing rapidly.
- Key measures, such as the proportion testing positive, the case incidence, hospitalisations, and deaths, have increased rapidly in all provinces, apart from the Free State (FS) and Northern Cape (NC), over the past 3 weeks. Both the FS and NC experienced earlier resurgences. In addition, the proportion testing positive and the case incidence may have recently plateaued in Gauteng (GP).
- The case-based effective reproductive number (R) for the country as a whole increased rapidly during the recent Level 2 lockdown, before stabilising during Level 3. At the national level, R was estimated to be 1.32 (confidence interval (CI):1.26 - 1.36) on 1 July 2021. A value substantially above 1 indicates a strongly growing epidemic.
- As of 1 July 2021, most provincial R estimates were similar to the national estimate, with the exceptions of the NC (1.01; CI: 0.97 -1.05) and FS (1.14; CI: 1.10 - 1.18), which had experienced earlier resurgences or waves.
- Due to lags in data availability, it is not yet possible to use R estimates or mobility data to draw definitive conclusions about the impact of the current Level 4 restrictions.

2. Short term forecasts (2 week horizon)

- There is a 94% probability that KZN will cross the third wave threshold on or before 17 July.
- There is a high probability (78%) that R has recently declined below 1 in GP. If it has not already dropped below 1, it is highly probable it will do so in the near future. Hospital admissions and deaths will however continue to increase in GP for the next 1-3 weeks.
- COVID-19 case incidence and related hospital admissions are likely to increase rapidly in the Eastern Cape (EC), KZN, Limpopo (LP), Mpumalanga (MP), North West (NW) and Western Cape (WC) during the next 2 weeks.
- FS is projected to see moderate increases over the short term, though the trajectory is somewhat uncertain as much of the third wave in the province appears to have occurred prior to the emergence of the Delta variant.
- The NC is projected to see declines in both incidence and hospital admissions in the short term.

3. Medium term forecasts (2-6 weeks)

- The effect of behavioural and lockdown responses on the size of the third wave is likely to be greater in provinces which are still in the earlier phase of the third wave.
- Peak daily hospital admissions are projected to be similar to the second wave in most provinces under the less extreme response scenarios. GP admissions are projected to peak within the next two weeks, KZN, LP, and WC by late-July or early-August, and EC in early- to mid-August.
- Nationally, total hospital admissions over the course of the third wave are likely to be between the values seen in the first and second waves, while deaths (in hospital and total) might surpass the level seen in the second wave.
- Cases and admissions are expected to reduce to low levels across all provinces by September 2021.
- Uncertainty in seroprevalence data and the distribution of variants between and within provinces reduces the ability to produce robust projections in some provinces, including projections of a third wave in MP and potential resurgences in the FS, NC, and NW provinces, where limited information is available on the extent of transmission of the delta variant. Model projections for these provinces are preliminary and will be updated rapidly as new data become available.
- Model scenarios depict waves of different sizes in each of the provinces as a result of possible NPI fatigue. The increased transmissibility of the Delta variant places greater importance on renewed strong NPI adherence and vigilance, as well as enforcement of restrictions (particularly on gatherings).

- The model estimates to date show an appreciable impact of vaccinations on hospital admissions and deaths. Even with continued NPI fatigue, therefore, rapid vaccination of the population provides a powerful tool to reduce severe illness and death.

Recommendations

The MAC on COVID-19 recommends that:

- the Adjusted Level 4 restrictions remain in place after 11 July 2021, with an extension of 14 days;
- urgent attention be given to the effective enforcement of the Regulations issued on 27 June 2021, specifically in relation to mass gatherings, including funerals and political events;
- continued emphasis be placed on adherence to NPIs, noting and appreciating that many South African residents are behaving responsibly and appropriately; and
- renewed effort be made to ensure rapid access to and acceptance of COVID-19 vaccination.

These recommendations remain fully aligned with many technical suggestions in the MAC's Third Wave Advisory submitted on 31 March 2021.

Regarding possible NPI fatigue and vaccine acceptance, the MAC on COVID-19 acknowledges the evidence provided by the VAX Scenes report, and the clear linkages established between the economic impact of the pandemic on communities and their perceived limited agency and choices, both collectively and individually. Careful attention must be paid to the clarity of public health messaging (as per Third Wave Advisory dated 30 June 2021) and how well it takes account of people's lived realities, in order to maximise NPI adherence and vaccine uptake.

Equally, while the pace at which COVID-19 vaccination is rolled out is key, so is close attention to equity in access. Careful tracking of access at provincial, district, urban and rural, and public versus private sectors is critical. The positive messages towards vaccine acceptance in the Wave 5 NIDS-CRAM report are also noted.

Continued scrutiny of the social and economic impact of COVID-related restrictions is needed. Where such restrictions are seen not to have the desired or expected impact, or where unintended consequences are identified, remedial action is needed. This is particularly true of restrictions which limit economic activity and may contribute to worsening of unemployment or reduced income.

Rationale for recommendation

The MAC on COVID-19 has based its core recommendation that an extension of the current Adjusted Level 4 restrictions is justified on the following rationale:

- it is not possible, based on available data and the limited timeframe, to conclude that the risks which prompted the imposition of Adjusted Level 4 restrictions on 28 June 2021 have abated to such an extent that relaxation of those restrictions is possible on 11 July 2021;
- where there is some evidence, in terms of test positivity or case incidence, that previous resurgences have declined, or the third wave has plateaued, there may still be sustained and increasing hospital admissions;
- as noted before, case fatality rates worsen when hospital admissions exceed identified thresholds, which reflect the constrained health systems capacity in each province;
- neither the extent of vaccinations, nor evidence of prior infections (from seroprevalence studies), are yet sufficient to prevent a serious impact from the third wave, in both morbidity and mortality, especially as the highly transmissible Delta variant becomes dominant across South Africa.

The recommendation is also made to avoid a return to Level 5 lockdown and its attendant negative economic, social, health and educational consequences.

Thank you for consideration of this advisory.

Kind regards,



PROF KOLEKA MLISANA

CO-CHAIRPERSONS: MINISTERIAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON COVID-19

DATE: 9 July 2021



PROF MARIAN JACOBS

CC:

- » **Dr S Buthelezi (Director-General: Health)**
- » **Dr T Pillay (Deputy Director-General)**
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