

Ramaphosa: Lives are more important than completing academic year

Daily Maverick - 16 Jul 2020

PUBLIC IMBIZO Ramaphosa: Lives are more important than completing academic year By Greg Nicolson • 16 July 2020 President Cyril Ramaphosa. (Photo: GCIS / Kopano Tlape) As the education department continues talks with unions demanding the closure of schools, President Cyril Ramaphosa has called for consensus as his government continues to evaluate how it can save lives during the coronavirus pandemic. President Cyril Ramaphosa has cautiously commented on the ongoing debate on whether schools should be closed to prevent the spread of Covid-19, saying saving lives is more important than finishing the academic year. The president was speaking during a virtual public imbizo on Wednesday evening after multiple unions, including the SA Democratic Teachers Union (Sadtu), National Professional Teachers' Organisation of SA (Naptosa) and Public Servants Association (PSA), had called for the reclosure of schools until the country passes its Covid-19 peak. "We are going to sit back and listen very, very carefully to all the key role players about the reopening of schools. Losing an academic year, to us, cannot be weighed up against the lives we must lose. Lives are more important," said Ramaphosa. "That's why we are going to go back and have a discussion, and if we have to get to a point of closing the schools that will be the decision and so be it, because it's about saving lives." Ramaphosa referred multiple times to advice from the World Health Organisation, which has said countries should not reopen schools while they continue to experience a rise in the Covid-19 infection rate. The president said when schools were reopened, the government believed strict physical distancing and hygiene measures could prevent the spread of Covid-19. As of Wednesday evening, South Africa had recorded 311,049 confirmed cases of Covid-19, an increase of almost 13,000 in 24 hours, with 4,453 deaths and 160,693 recoveries. Basic Education Minister Angie Motshekga is expected to conclude discussions with stakeholders in the sector by Friday and Cabinet will deliberate over the weekend on whether to continue with classes, which resumed on June 8 for Grade 7 and 12 learners and Grades 6 and 11 on 6 July. "There has been a clear voice and a message that's coming from teacher unions, a number of other people, and we are going to listen to that, we're going to engage as it is now," said Ramaphosa. "We've got to sit back and discuss this matter and to sit back in a way where we look for solutions. It's not to sit back for finger-pointing purposes," he added. The president also touched on the recent decisions to prohibit the sale of alcohol under Level 3 of the lockdown and to allow taxis to fill their vehicles up to 100% capacity on local routes. The president hit back at a question on whether the government had a threshold on how many teachers and learners must die before it chooses to close schools again. "Every life is important to us. It is absolutely important. We don't focus on how many people should die first before we take a particular action. We don't approach it that way. Our strategy is not based on the number of lives of people who must die," said Ramaphosa. "It's not even a matter of weighing up a threshold, because that would be an approach that I don't even want to see, I don't even want to get to. I don't even want any of us to talk about how many lives must we lose and [asking] the tolerance level for us in terms of losing lives, what is it? We want to save lives." The president also touched on the recent decisions to prohibit the sale of alcohol under Level 3 of the lockdown and to allow taxis to fill their vehicles up to 100% capacity on local routes. "We know, as I've said previously, it [the ban on alcohol sales] is an imposition on our rights. When you're in a war your rights are restricted because we've got to protect every life," he said. He reiterated comments from his ministers that the resumption of alcohol sales on 1 June under Level 3 of the lockdown led to an increase in trauma patients at hospitals, which used resources that could otherwise be devoted to treating Covid-19 patients. "It's not a ban. It's a suspension to allow our health system to be able to cope," said the president on the regulations that prohibit the sale of alcohol and tobacco products. He said taxis were allowed to operate at full capacity under "strict conditions" to help

people get to work. In addition to having to follow sanitising regulations, taxis must now open their windows partially to promote ventilation and operators can be criminally charged if they allow passengers inside the vehicle without masks. Justifying why people can ride in crammed taxis while visiting family members is still banned, Ramaphosa said people are allowed to travel to work, for medical purposes, to buy essential goods and to exercise, but should otherwise stay at home. “The visits, general casual visits, are precisely what we believe spreads the virus and we want to limit that as much as we possibly can.” DM CoronavirusCovid-19Cyril RamaphosalockdownSA schools Greg Nicolson Follow Save More Comments - share your knowledge and experience Please note you must be a Maverick Insider to comment. Sign up here or sign in if you are already an Insider.