

Message by President Cyril Ramaphosa on the occasion of Freedom Day

27 Apr 2020

Fellow South Africans,

Sanibonani. Dumelang. Inhlekani. Molweni. Lotjhani. Ndi masiari. Goeie dag. Good afternoon.

On this day twenty-six years ago, a new nation was born in Africa.

On the 27th of April 1994, the men, women and children of South Africa emerged from the dark vale of oppression to stand in the light of freedom.

As millions cast their votes for the first time, they boldly declared to the world that South Africa belongs to all who live in it.

The price of our freedom was paid by generations of patriots.

We pay tribute to the great leaders who resisted colonial domination and who fought for our liberation, both those who have left us and those who are still living.

We remember Chief Albert Luthuli, Nelson Mandela, Govan Mbeki, Oliver Reginald Tambo, Walter Sisulu, Albertina Sisulu, Stephen Bantu Biko, Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe, Charlotte Manna Maxeke, Ruth Segomotsi Mompati and Mam Winnie Madikizela-Mandela.

We remember John Langalibalele Dube, Dr AB Xuma, Sefako Mapogo Makgatho, ZR Mahabane, Josiah Gumede, Pixley ka Isaka Seme, King Cetswayo, King Hintsha, Makhanda, Sekhukhune, Makhado, Bambatha and the many brave leaders of the Khoi and San rebellions.

They watered the tree of liberty so we could enjoy its fruit and stand under its shade today.

We honour their memory and the contribution of the many ordinary compatriots whose names are unknown but whose sacrifices were just as great.

Our Constitution, and the Freedom Charter from which it draws its inspiration, both begin with the words: 'We, the People'.

They are an ever-present reminder that everything we have achieved as a young democracy and everything we hope to achieve is founded on the will of the people.

Our Constitution is the defender of all who live in our great land, be they black or white, rich or poor, young or old, man or woman, citizen or resident.

Over the past 26 years we have made great progress in building a common future in which all South Africans have a part.

We have been building homes, schools, hospitals, clinics and universities.

We have been providing water, sanitation and electricity to many South Africans who never had access to such services.

We have expanded access to health care and education.

We have been hard at work to rebuild our economy and strengthen our institutions.

We have initiated work, internship and study opportunities for young people, assisting them to secure jobs or to be self-employed.

We have accelerated programmes to give our people access to land, and returned land to those who were forcibly removed.

We are supporting vulnerable families, parents, the elderly, persons with disabilities and our veterans with social grants.

Our young democracy has much to be proud of.

But the devastating legacy of our past runs so deep that at times we ourselves have been found wanting in addressing the suffering it has subjected our people to.

Poverty and inequality continues to stalk our land.

A child born to parents of means has a comfortable home, is fed and sheltered, receives a good education and has good prospects for a prosperous life.

For a poor child, every day of life can be a struggle for shelter, for food and for opportunity.

For such a child, their chances of finishing school, of studying further, of gaining useful skills and of finding a job are much smaller.

Even now, after all the progress we have made, the circumstances of one's birth largely determines where and how we live, where we study, where we work and where we are cared for when we are sick.

It is the greatest form of injustice. It is a stain on our national conscience.

The triumph of 1994 was about much more than being able to vote.

It was about setting right the wrongs of the past, about redress, restitution and restoration.

It was about levelling the field for the black child and the white child, and making sure they each have an equal chance in life.

The promise we made on the 27th of April 1994 can no longer be deferred.

We must make real the right of all our people to health care, food, shelter, water, social security and land.

In this final decade of the National Development Plan, we must change the pace of social and economic transformation.

As a country, we are more than capable of building a more equal society where these rights are realised.

For as long as this is delayed, freedom for some is freedom for none.

This Freedom Day, we find ourselves engaged in a struggle that has thrown into sharp focus the poverty and inequality that still defines our society.

The coronavirus pandemic forces us to confront this reality.

Though we are certainly all braving the same tide, we have not been impacted in the same way by this pandemic.

Some people have been able to endure the coronavirus lockdown in a comfortable home with a fully stocked fridge, with private medical care and online learning for their children.

For millions of others, this has been a month of misery, of breadwinners not working, of families struggling to survive and of children going to bed and waking up hungry.

The social relief measures announced last week that are now being implemented are therefore as much about narrowing the gulf of inequality as they are about supporting vulnerable citizens through this trying time.

With every day that passes, this experience is teaching us much about ourselves, about our society and about our country.

We are learning about the limits of our endurance, about our relations with others and about our very nationhood.

The true lessons of this experience will not just be about the necessity of social distancing, proper hand washing and infection control.

They will also be about whether we have the ability to turn this crisis into an opportunity to invest in a new society, a new consciousness and a new economy.

In this new society, the privileged cannot afford to close their eyes to the plight of the poor and sleep peacefully at night.

This is the time when we should actively work to build a fair and just country

In the South Africa that we all want, no man, woman or child will go hungry, because they will have the means to earn an income, and our social assistance programmes will be matched by efforts to enable communities to grow their own food.

In this new society, the provision of services to our people is the foremost priority of government.

The public servant understands that they are just that: a servant of the people.

Public representatives put the interests of the people ahead of their own.

Before this pandemic was visited on our country, we were deepening our efforts to address poverty, underdevelopment, unemployment and a weak economy.

This pandemic could set these efforts back by many years.

It will take a great deal of effort and resources for our society and our economy to recover.

The challenges we faced before this health emergency remain.

Even as we turn the tide on the coronavirus pandemic, we will still have to confront a contracting economy, unemployment, crime and corruption, a weakened state and other pressing concerns.

We will have to find new, exceptional and innovative ways to overcome them.

This is not something government can do alone.

The collaborative spirit with which government, business, labour and civil society formations have worked to drive the national effort to combat the coronavirus is yet another affirmation of just how far we have come.

Robust engagement, strong institutions, social compacting and consensus-building are all the fruits of the national democratic project that began in 1994.

The business community has shown itself ready and willing to support the workforce and to rally its resources to combat this disease.

The labour movement has worked with its partners in government and business not only to protect its members from the worst effects of this pandemic, but to champion the interests of the poor and unemployed.

Across society, NGOs, non-profit organisations, community bodies, religious communities and individuals are working together to defend our people against this virus and its damaging economic and social effects.

In doing so, they have demonstrated the solidarity and compassion that is at the centre of the concept of ubuntu.

As President Nelson Mandela said: "To be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others."

Respect for the rights of others is the beating heart of freedom.

Violating the coronavirus response provisions and exposing others to a potentially fatal illness is the worst form of disrespect for others.

This pandemic has changed the face of humankind, not just our country.

It has reminded us of our own mortality, but also of how interconnected we are.

If we did not realise it before, we all know it now – that our interdependence is key to our very survival as a people.

This Freedom Day let us stand united against this disease.

Let us also stand united against poverty, inequality and hunger.

We can only overcome this crisis and rebuild our shattered economy if we work together.

Let the good that has come from this experience – of collective action and unity of purpose – continue.

Let the generosity of spirit endure.

We owe it to the memories of those who came before us to live the values they cherished, of empathy, compassion and solidarity.

As we are reminded this Freedom Day, we have known far worse and we have prevailed.

Let us keep our arms locked together in a column of defence against this pandemic, a united people.

Let us use this crisis to reaffirm our resolve to fundamentally change our society.

Let us emerge from the coronavirus pandemic a better country, a more equal country.

This year, we are celebrating Freedom Day apart, each of us confined to our homes.

Next year – through your determination, through your courage and through your actions – we will once again celebrate Freedom Day together.

I wish you all a happy and, above all, a safe and peaceful Freedom Day.

I thank you.