



health

Department:  
Health  
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA



Enquiries: Prof S Abdool Karim  
E-mail: salim.abdoolkarim@caprisa.org

**INTERNAL MEMO**

Date:	30 December 2020 (Update from prior advisory 9 December 2020)		
To:	<b>The Honorable Dr ZL Mkhize, Minister of Health</b>	From:	<b>Ministerial Advisory Committee (MAC) on COVID-19</b>

**SCREENING PROCESS FOR LAND BORDER CROSSINGS DURING THE FESTIVE SEASON**

**Problem Statement**

The MAC on COVID-19 was requested to review the COVID-19 screening protocol for land border crossings during the festive season.

**Evidence review**

- Historically, data from the Department of Home Affairs for border crossings over the festive seasons 2015/16, 2016/17 and 2017/18 has shown an estimated 8 million people crossing South Africa’s borders with an estimated 4,3 million people *entering* South Africa during this time.<sup>2</sup> StatsSA data for December 2019/January 2020 shows an estimated 4,4million people arriving.<sup>3</sup>
- Aside from returning South Africans, the most movement is seen across the Lesotho and Zimbabwe borders followed by Mozambique, Eswatini and Botswana. South Africa and its neighbouring countries account for more than 80% of all arrivals.
- Recently-released StatsSA data shows a significant reduction (>90%) in travel across the borders since lockdown with just over 75,000 people entering South Africa in September 2020.<sup>4</sup>
- Since the beginning of the pandemic, as of 29<sup>th</sup> December 2020, South Africa has conducted a total of 6,445,318 tests, Lesotho 32,045 tests, Zimbabwe 197,887 tests, Mozambique 267,599 tests, Eswatini 75,038 tests and Botswana 523,759 tests.<sup>5</sup>
- Antigen tests can be used to detect SARS-CoV-2 with high specificity in people with a high viral load (i.e. pre-symptomatic or within the first 5-7 days of symptoms).<sup>6</sup>
- The World Health Organization states that antigen tests can be used in settings where PCR tests are unavailable or where delays in providing results will render the information no longer useful.<sup>7</sup>
- The MAC on COVID-19 Advisory on the *Use of Antigen Tests at Ports of Entry (30 October 2020)* recommends that: *If travelers present without a PCR test result on arrival at a South African airport or sea port, an antigen test should be taken at the point of entry. If the antigen test result is negative, the traveler can be allowed into the country.*<sup>8</sup>

## Points of consideration

- Current regulations stipulate that any person who enters South Africa must have a negative COVID-19 Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) test result of no more than 72 hrs. from departure from the country of origin, be screened on arrival and provide proof of accommodation in the event of self-quarantine.<sup>1</sup> Those travelers arriving without a PCR test have been offered COVID-19 antigen tests at the border post at their own expense.
- Limited capacity and resources for COVID-19 antigen testing at border posts has led to significant delays, with waiting periods leading to health and social harm.
- Anticipated higher volumes of returning people at the border posts, particularly during the festive season (1 December to mid-January), poses a potential risk to further queues and delays.
- There may be limited access to PCR testing in country of origin, including South Africa. Testing capacity may be insufficient to cope with influx of requests for travel.
- Most people are coming from neighbouring countries where the number of active cases and the risk of importation of the virus is low. The prevalence risk is below 0.1% with the exception of Lesotho (due to small population).
- The high cost of PCR testing in South Africa (R850) and country of origin (e.g. R1200 Lesotho, R1600 Zambia) is unaffordable to migrant workers and travelers, especially from the informal sector.
- SARS-CoV-2 is endemic in South Africa with little value to be gained by requesting PCR screening in comparison to the costs to be incurred.
- Current regulations in neighbouring countries all require negative PCR test within 72/48 hrs. but some countries, such as Mozambique, use the principle of reciprocity and align their policies with those of South Africa.
- Frequent travelers and daily commuters are required to provide proof of a negative PCR test which is valid for 14 days to allow for regular border crossings.
- Cross border freight crew are required to provide proof of a negative antigen test which is valid for 30 days subject to screening and testing by their employer.
- Delays at the border crossings will encourage crowding and potential transmission hot spots. A simplified screening process would facilitate entry processes.
- From a public health perspective, a recommendation to remove testing requirements at the land border posts is unlikely to have any impact on changing the course of the pandemic in South Africa. COVID-19 symptom screening and temperature monitoring would still take place.

## Recommendations

1. It is strongly recommended to discontinue COVID-19 testing requirements for land-border entry into South Africa.
2. It is strongly recommended to implement a travel bubble with select neighbouring countries for the following reasons:
  - a) The risk of infectious people entering South Africa with active SARS-CoV-2 infection from Zimbabwe, Lesotho, eSwatini, Namibia, Mozambique and Botswana is low due to the very low prevalence of active cases in these countries.
  - b) The use of PCR tests and/or antigen tests is not cost-effective with a low positive yield. Further, there are other more important demands on these tests, especially since South Africa has experienced shortages of these tests.
  - c) A travel bubble with neighbouring countries (Botswana, Eswatini, Lesotho, Mozambique, Namibia and Zimbabwe) will remove requirements for any testing for

persons entering South Africa provided certain criteria are met by these countries (e.g. local transmission remains below a specified threshold). Travelers from any country that is not part of the travel bubble would need to provide proof of a negative PCR or antigen test.

3. COVID-19 symptom screening and temperature monitoring should still take place, noting their limitations. It is recommended to impose a legal obligation to be truthful in responding to the screening questions, together with the penalties for non-compliance to the screening tool.
4. Risk mitigation procedures such as social distancing, regular washing or sanitizing of hands and wearing of masks, should be enforced at all times.
5. All travelers should be required to download and use the NDOH COVID-Alert App.
6. Clear guidelines are available on how to manage travelers who do present with symptoms or test positive and ensure adequate referral and quarantine processes are available.
7. Truck drivers and transport of goods should be given priority at border crossing, within the restrictions of customs and passports regulations, to ensure the provision of goods and services to neighbouring countries.
8. It is recommended that travelers leaving South Africa should be required to adhere to the COVID-19 testing and screening requirements of the destination country. This is done to ensure that persons leaving South Africa do not get caught in trans-border zone or customs area. This will require the following:
  - a) Travelers need to be aware of the destination country requirements for COVID-19 testing.
  - b) Port Health Authorities are required to review the COVID-19 testing status of persons leaving South Africa, to meet the requirements of the destination country.
  - c) Travelers should be encouraged to test before departure and not rely on access to antigen testing at the border crossings, although these should be made available at ports of entry as a reserve capacity. Limited testing facilities and test kits should be planned for at each border crossing as testing priority is given to public health facilities for the diagnosis of COVID-19.

These recommendations do not apply to air or sea travel, only to those crossing land borders from a SADC country. The MAC Advisory on *Use Of Antigen Tests At Ports Of Entry (30 October 2020)* refers.

## References

1. AMENDMENT OF DIRECTIONS ISSUED IN TERMS OF REGULATION 4(1)(a) OF THE REGULATIONS MADE UNDER SECTION 27(2) OF THE DISASTER MANAGEMENT ACT, 2002 (ACT No. 57 OF 2002): MEASURES TO ADDRESS, PREVENT AND COMBAT THE SPREAD OF COVID -19. Gazette 43954, December 3<sup>rd</sup> 2020
2. Department of Home Affairs, BM Project Management Office to inform on the status of readiness of Ports of Entry/Borderline for the 2018/19 Festive Period
3. StatisticsSA. Tourism and Migration report January 2020. Statistical Release P0351 and datasets
4. StatisticsSA. Tourism and Migration report September 2020. Statistical Release P0351 and datasets
5. Worldometer Coronavirus 25<sup>th</sup> November 2020. <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/#countries>
6. Dinnes\_J, Deeks\_JJ, Adriano\_A, Berhane\_S, Davenport\_C, Dittrich\_S, Emperador\_D, Takwoingi\_Y, Cunningham\_J, Beese\_S, Dretzke\_J, Ferrante di Ru&ano\_L, Harris\_IM, Price\_MJ, Taylor-Phillips\_S, Hoo\_L, Leeflang\_MMJ, Spijker\_R, Van den Bruel\_A. Rapid, point-of-care antigen and molecular-based tests for diagnosis of SARS-CoV-2 infection. Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews 2020, Issue 8. Art. No.: CD013705. DOI: 10.1002/14651858.CD013705.
7. WHO Antigen-detection in the diagnosis of SARS-CoV-2 infection using rapid immunoassays Interim guidance. 11 September 2020 | COVID-19: Laboratory and diagnosis. <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/antigen-detection-in-the-diagnosis-of-sars-cov-2infection-using-rapid-immunoassays>
8. MAC on COVID-19 Advisory on Using Antigen Testing at Ports of Entry, 30 October 2020. Internal Memo to Minister of Health.

Thank you for consideration of this request. Kind regards,

**PROFESSOR NHLANHLA MKHIZE**

**ACTING CHAIRPERSON: MINISTERIAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON COVID-19**

**DATE:** 30 December 2020

**CC:**

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