



IN FULL | Ramaphosa highlights measures by government to address foodborne illness crisis

President Cyril Ramaphosa addressed the nation on Friday evening, highlighting measures by the government to address the foodborne illness crisis, including the closure of spaza shops implicated in the deaths of children.

Fellow South Africans,

I wish to address you this evening on a matter that has deeply saddened and distressed our nation. Across the country, there has been a rise in reported cases of foodborne illnesses and deaths.

A number of people are becoming severely ill and even dying after eating contaminated food.

It has been found that some of the food items would have been purchased from spaza shops and street vendors. Since the beginning of September 2024, there have been a total of 890 reported incidents of foodborne illnesses across all provinces.

Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal have been the most affected, with Limpopo, Free State and Mpumalanga also recording dozens of incidents.

Over the last few weeks alone, foodborne illnesses have claimed the lives of at least 22 of our nation's children. Last month there was a major foodborne incident in Naledi in Soweto in which six children died. The youngest of these children was just six years old.

Few words can adequately convey our sadness and our pain as a nation. Our thoughts and prayers are with their families as they go through the pain and the anguish of losing their children. Losing a child is something no parent should ever have to endure. The young children who died weren't just children of their families. They were our children.

Our people have every right to be upset and to be angry in the face of such tragedies. At a time like this, we need to unite as a country and work together to end these deaths. We must do what it takes to make sure such tragedies never happen again. As soon as the deaths occurred, multidisciplinary teams in government were activated to address these incidents.

These teams included detectives from the South African Police Service, health officials, environmental inspectors, Department of Agriculture officials and officials from the National Consumer Commission. Cabinet has met on three occasions to receive reports from these departments on the recent incidents.

This is what we now know: The National Institute for Communicable Diseases was requested to conduct scientific tests and has established that the deaths of the six children in Naledi, Soweto, can be directly attributed to a highly hazardous chemical used as a pesticide known as Terbufos.

Terbufos can have serious health effects, even at low levels of exposure.

Terbufos is an organophosphate chemical that is registered in South Africa for Agricultural use. It is not allowed to be sold for general household use. However, Terbufos is being informally sold as a so-called 'street pesticide' for domestic use in townships and informal settlements to control rats.

Samples were taken from 84 spaza shops in the Naledi area. Of these, three had evidence of Terbufos. After stringent testing, a chip packet found on one of the children who had died had traces of Terbufos on both the inside and the outside of the packet.

As part of the investigation into the Naledi deaths, inspectors confiscated a number of illegal pesticides from spaza shops. They found instances where food was being stored alongside pesticides and detergents.

It was also found that these spaza shops lacked proper safe food storage, hand and dishwashing facilities, increasing the likelihood of food contamination.

Even as our investigations are ongoing, it is critical to understand that this is not a problem confined to spaza shops and other informal traders.

The unregulated use of restricted pesticides in communities has become a growing problem, with devastating consequences. In many townships another chemical, aldicarb, and an organophosphate known as Galephirimi are commonly sold by street vendors and hawkers to control rat infestations.

Aldicarb has been banned for use in South Africa since 2016. Last year, three children in Ekurhuleni and three children in Soweto died after exposure to aldicarb. In responding to these tragedies, we need to understand the cause of this challenge in our communities.

One of the reasons that people use pesticides is to deal with rat infestation.

The problem of rat infestation is due in part to poor waste management in several municipalities.

Rubbish is not collected regularly, streets are not being cleaned, creating conditions for rats and other pests to thrive. Often, the poorest communities are the worst affected, and often the cheapest remedies that are used are these highly hazardous substances like Terbufos and Aldicarb.

Another challenge is that responsibility for environmental health that should happen in our communities is the responsibility of local government.

Many municipalities do not have the capacity and resources to conduct inspections of these businesses and enforce regulations.

Our response must therefore address all the factors that contribute to the problem. We also need to prevent the spread of misinformation.

The investigations that have taken place do not suggest any deliberate campaign to poison children in our country. There is also no evidence that the problem is confined to spaza shops owned by foreign nationals only. These products are just as likely to be sold in shops owned by South Africans.

We all have a duty – as the state, as a society, as parents and families – to protect those among us who are most vulnerable.

Following the special meeting of Cabinet, we have decided to make the following interventions:

The first intervention is to get hazardous pesticides off the street.

The second critical intervention is to protect children from exposure to these substances.

The third critical intervention is to prevent future outbreaks.

The following measures will be implemented with immediate effect.

To get hazardous pesticides off the street:

- The spaza shops which have been implicated in the deaths of children will be closed with immediate effect.
- All spaza shops and other food handling facilities must be registered within the municipalities in which they operate within 21 days from today. Any shop that is not registered within 21 days and does not meet all health standards and requirements will be closed.
- The South African Police Service and other law enforcement agencies will be required to investigate, arrest and prosecute offenders. This will involve close cooperation with all registered manufacturers and suppliers.
- Integrated multidisciplinary inspection teams will undertake compliance inspections of food handling facilities, manufacturers, distributors, wholesalers and retailers. This will include spaza shops and general dealers. Non-compliant businesses and shops linked to any poisoning incidents or found to unlawfully stock hazardous chemicals will be shut down.
- A massive campaign of door-to-door inspection of all spaza shops, tuck shops and other informal traders will be undertaken, starting with Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal. This will be undertaken by inter-disciplinary inspections teams consisting of the South African Military Health Services, environmental health practitioners, the South African Police Service, the National Consumer Council, labour inspectors and others. The initial phase of inspections will need to be completed within a month.
- All registered manufacturers of Terbufos will be inspected to ensure that no products are diverted into the non-agricultural market. The supply chain process for distribution and sale of Terbufos will be investigated to ensure that controls are being adhered to and that there is accountability for who they sell to.
- Regulations and protocols on the traceability, repackaging, destruction and sale of pesticides, insecticides and foodstuffs will be strengthened.

The second intervention is about the protection of children from exposure to harmful substances:

- The Department of Basic Education will immediately issue a circular to provincial education departments and all schools on best practice protocols for preventing and managing foodborne illnesses within schools.
- By the start of the new school year, the Department of Basic Education and school governing bodies, together with the Department of Health, will review and update the

guidelines for schools on the management of suppliers of foodstuffs to public schools. This will include tuck shops operated at these schools.

- A public education campaign will be launched aimed at children, parents, caregivers and the broader community on food safety and the identification, handling and storage of dangerous chemicals. This campaign will involve GCIS [Government Communication and Information System], government departments and agencies, industry organisations and civil society formations. This will be complemented by a public education campaign aimed at communities, spaza shops, tuck shops, informal traders and other retailers on health, safety and hygiene regulations, the identification of hazardous products, regulations that apply to hazardous products and legal consequences.
- The ministers of basic education and health and other government departments will classify certain pesticides and insecticides not suitable for home use as "dangerous objects" that may not be brought or used on school premises. This will be undertaken in terms of the Regulations on Safety Measures for Public Schools.

The third intervention will be aimed at preventing future outbreaks:

- I have directed that joint operational and intelligence structures be established at a national and provincial level to deal with this crisis.
- Our local municipalities will be required to take urgent action to address the problem of rat infestations by cleaning cities and towns and removing waste. All municipal landfill sites will be required to comply with the National Environmental Management: Waste Act. Failure to comply will result in strict sanctions that include directives, compliance notices and criminal enforcement.
- A ministerial health advisory committee is being established to develop medium- and long-term prevention measures. This committee will consist of experts such as toxicologists, paediatricians, chemical pathologists, epidemiologists, forensic pathologists and others.
- All deaths of patients 12 years and below will be made notifiable in the Notifiable Medical Condition Surveillance System. An electronic medical certification of death system will be established to allow the National Department of Health to access cause of death information immediately after a death is certified.
- The work of the Biosecurity Hub will be strengthened to better control the entry of products, organisms and harmful biological products at ports of entry.
- The Department of Agriculture is in the process of reviewing and updating all relevant legislation with respect to the regulation and authorisation of agricultural pesticides for use in South Africa.
- A joint fund of R500 million will be established by the departments of trade, industry and competition and small business development to support township and rural businesses, including community convenience shops. The funding will be for the refurbishment of businesses and non-financial support in terms of technical skills, regulatory compliance and capacity building.

As we undertake these interventions and measures, there is a lot that we can do as parents to protect our children. As consumers and parents, if we buy food or send our children to buy food, it must only be from places that are licensed to sell foodstuffs and that observe food safety regulations.

We must check that food is prepared in a clean and hygienic area. We must make sure that foodstuffs being sold have clear branding and labels, and that they are not past their sell-by date.

We must educate our children about food safety and teach them to check for this labelling themselves. Anyone who sees fake foodstuffs and expired foodstuffs being sold in our communities should report them to the National Consumer Commission.

The number for the National Consumer Commission is 012 065 1940.

We have to take greater care with the storage and use of pesticides and dangerous chemicals.

We must only buy pesticides that are in their original containers and that are clearly labelled for household use.

All dangerous chemicals must be kept out of reach of children.

Spaza shops and street vendors have a special responsibility for the health and safety of their customers. They need to operate responsibly and in terms of the law. They need to observe certain basic practices.

For example, they must not use the same containers or implements for chemical substances and food.

Only pesticides and chemicals registered for household use may be sold.

They must be clearly labelled and in their original packaging.

Establishments found to be in possession of pesticides that are restricted or banned will face legal consequences.

Once again, South Africans are called upon to work together to overcome a great difficulty. But we are far from helpless. There is much we can do.

Each of us needs to be better informed about the risks of pesticides and other dangerous products.

Each of us needs to take responsibility for the safety and well-being of those around us, particularly the children of our nation.

By working together, by enforcing the law, by being alert and responsible, we will be able to bring an end to these tragedies.

I thank you.