

For immediate release

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Statement on loss of life, hunger, unrest, violence, and its impact on health care and vaccine access in South Africa

The [Health Justice Initiative](#) ('HJI') has been working to advance equitable access to vaccines for all people since mid-2020. We are gutted and distressed that in a pandemic, with increasing rates of infection and deaths, that in our country, lives have been tragically lost, due to instigated violence and unrest, coupled with frightening factional politics fuelling instability in our country, which is also exploiting legitimate grievances.

This tragic and violent week has brought into sharp focus South Africa's chronic hunger and unemployment challenges, its gross inequality and worrying levels of racism, ethnic tension, and xenophobia - issues that have been highlighted for many years by several organisations working closely on these issues.

The HJI supports other civil society organisations, religious, cultural, and civic groupings call for, among others:

1. The violence and looting to stop and for it to be properly investigated; and
2. The introduction of immediate humanitarian, socio-economic mitigation, and proper relief measures in line with Constitutional obligations.

The HJI is deeply concerned about the loss of lives, the destruction of health, social and economic infrastructure and the looting of pharmacies and the destruction of critical health infrastructure. This will have a long-term severe impact on communities that are most vulnerable. Health Care Workers in affected areas are also less able to travel safely to work, further hampering efforts to treat all patients and to vaccinate the nation.

Interruption of Health Services

Entrenched health access inequities across race and class lines in our dual, unequal, health care system means that access to health services during this time will be severely compromised and interrupted for those most vulnerable in our country.

Our current efforts to test and vaccinate everyone for Covid-19, and to treat all patients who are pregnant, or living with HIV, TB, cancer, and other chronic health conditions is now at risk. And, because patients with comorbidities have not been specifically prioritised in the vaccine roll out, they are at great risk of infection and illness.

In addition, operating health facilities in Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal are further stretched by providing care not just for COVID-19 patients, but also to those [injured](#) in the violence.

Our Covid-19 testing and vaccine programme is now in even greater peril because:

1. There has been a decline in people seeking testing while the Delta variant circulates. It is now even more critical that testing sites are open, functional, and safe.
2. [Vaccines](#) have been stolen or destroyed at a time when we have very limited supplies in the system from only two manufacturers.
3. There are reports of a pharmaceutical plant being set on fire.

4. Some vaccine sites (about 19) have [been temporarily closed](#) in at least two provinces in areas affected by the violence, disrupting vaccine uptake, at a time when we should be accelerating the programme to achieve population immunity.
5. Many elderly people especially in Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal are likely to be cut off from vaccine sites and access for some time, unless safe and free transport to other / alternative vaccine sites is provided urgently.
6. With the launch of vaccine registration for people 35 years and older this week, we are concerned that elderly and uninsured people in Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal will not be prioritised speedily enough nor properly supported to travel to and reach open vaccination centres.
7. There is a chronic national hunger and a humanitarian crisis which needs urgent addressing as it also influences vaccine uptake levels. For this reason, the call by the [Pay the Grants Campaign](#) to reinstate the Social Relief of Distress Grant and to introduce a [Basic Income Grant](#) must be supported and speedily implemented without resorting to austerity measures.

Government must clearly communicate a humanitarian, socio-economic relief and a [mitigation safety and access plan](#) for Covid-19 testing and vaccine access as a matter of urgency, especially for communities most affected by the violence.

We cannot have a situation where due to the violence, vaccines are diverted to “safe’ suburban areas and private sector sites in those areas only. This would further distort health equity and access in this pandemic.

Such a mitigation plan should indicate [how vaccines will be safely taken](#) to communities also affected by the violence, and in turn administered for those most at risk and in need.

To conclude:

1. [The public must be kept up to date](#) with the best available information on this matter in all respects and the Presidency; National Coronavirus Command Council and/or any other disaster response structure must hold daily ‘Question & Answer’ briefing sessions.
2. [An urgent government stakeholder meeting with Civil Society](#) organisations, to address immediate and long-term health needs to develop solutions to increase alternative ways to access essential medical care, chronic medicines, Covid-19 testing and vaccines is now necessary.
3. [ALL vaccines sites should now accept walk-ins](#) for ALL eligible persons, even the so called ‘private sector/medical scheme member’ sites.
4. [ALL people with co-morbidities](#) should be included in the vaccine programme, even adult patients under 35 and years of age. A circular to this effect should be issued.

Ends

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