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By Stephan McCoy
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Coronavirus accelerating in Africa as cases top 300,000

The spread of the coronavirus is accelerating across Africa with extreme rapidity. Every one of the continent's 54 countries, with a total of 1.2 billion people, has reported cases of the disease.

While the virus was initially slow to take hold, the World Health Organisation (WHO) warned, "Even though these cases in Africa account for less than 3 percent" of the global total it is clear "that the pandemic is accelerating."

Health care workers in Africa. (Credit: World Health Organization)

The WHO has warned that up to 10 million will be infected over the coming three to six months and that 300,000 people will die on the African continent. That is assuming

mitigation measures are put in place by the authorities. Without measures to mitigate the disease, millions could die.

The first case was reported February 14 in Egypt, at least 45 days after China first alerted the WHO about a novel coronavirus. At this point, of the 95,333 confirmed cases across the world, most were in mainland China. A few weeks later, Algeria, Nigeria, Morocco, Senegal, Tunisia and South Africa confirmed cases of the virus.

By March 20, the continent had officially recorded 1,000 cases. It took 98 days to reach 100,000 cases but only another 18 days to reach 200,000 cases. By May 13, every country had recorded a case, with Lesotho being the last to do so. Since then, the number of cases has risen by more than 60 percent. More than half of all the countries are experiencing community spread, with the number of cases now topping 336,000.

As of June 25, 8,856 deaths had been recorded, a likely underestimate given the continent's limited health care facilities, poor recording systems and the experience of widespread under-reporting in the advanced countries relative to the number of "excess deaths."

At first, the international media speculated that Africa's apparent low incidence and spread were due to its younger age demographic, race and the warmer weather. This has been firmly contradicted by the rapid spread of the disease.

A *Lancet* study pointed out that the countries with more connections to the world economy were more likely to import the virus, such as Egypt, Algeria, South Africa, Nigeria and Ethiopia. Africa's more advanced economies were the first to become infected and also had the highest capacity to respond to it.

Because of economic backwardness, Africa remains deeply disconnected from the rest of the world—only 5 percent of global tourism flows reach Africa, for example. While there is migration within Africa, there is relatively little into the continent. The number of Chinese nationals working on Chinese investment projects in Africa was 201,057 by the end of 2018, according to official Chinese sources, around 16 percent of China's total overseas workforce. Of these, 23 percent went to Algeria.

Algeria, Angola, Nigeria, Kenya and Ethiopia accounted for 58 percent of all Chinese workers in Africa at the end of 2018.

WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said that despite the initially low number of cases "the best advice for Africa is to prepare for the worst and prepare today," concluding, "I think Africa should wake up, I think my continent should wake up."

The Africa Center for Disease Control (CDC) chief John Nkengasong issued an equally dire warning, stating, "We've gone from looming threat to looming disaster."

There are on average just five hospital beds per 1 million inhabitants in Africa, compared to 4,000 in Europe. With most countries lacking the most basic health care infrastructure to cope with the pandemic, most governments moved swiftly to impose lockdowns.

The economic impact has plunged millions of Africans into extreme poverty and starvation. Prices for basic commodities, one of the continent's main exports, have fallen. Remittances from the diaspora—often 10 percent or more of a country's GDP—have collapsed as have key sectors such as horticulture due to the lack of flights to Europe.

Dominique Strauss-Kahn, the former head of the International Monetary Fund, warned about the economic fallout from the pandemic. Noting the scale of the continent's indebtedness even before the outbreak, he said, "African governments have issued more than $130 billion in Eurobonds, including $70 billion between 2017 and 2019 … As a result, debt servicing costs have jumped from 17.4 percent of exports in 2013 to 32.4 percent in 2019."

Debt levels will make it impossible for governments to pay public sector wages, severely disrupting what little remains of social services, including education and health, while per capita income falls. All this as Zambia and Zimbabwe face the worst drought in their history and East Africa faces devastation from locust swarms and floods.

A recent UN report on coronavirus in Africa warned that "social unrest" would result without a $100 billion investment in health care and a "social" response, plus another $100 billion to manage the economic fallout. Little in the way of either international aid, grants or debt relief has been forthcoming.

Most African countries have now eased the lockdowns in a back-to-work drive to create profits for the multinational corporations and banks.

In Nigeria, where the most violent lockdown in the world happened with at least 18 people killed by security forces, President Muhammadu Buhari declared, "No country can afford the full impact of a sustained lockdown, while awaiting the development of vaccines."

In South Africa, President Cyril Ramaphosa cynically used the economic hardship suffered by workers as a reason to reduce the lockdown level from five to three and reopen the economy.

African health systems, ill-equipped and understaffed, are now breaking under the burden of the pandemic. Many quarantine areas are dilapidated with reports of bad or inadequate food.

Epidemiologists from Africa CDC have warned of a "catastrophic shortage" of medical supplies and health care workers as border closures and price increases further drain the healthcare system. According to *Xinhua News,* at least 3,500 South African health care workers are infected with COVID-19. In the Western Cape, which has a disproportionate number of cases, intensive care beds are filling up.

Despite the WHO's recommendation to test, trace and isolate, many African governments—to the extent that they ever embraced them—have abandoned these basic measures to contain the spread of the virus, even as it starts to rip through the population.

Many African governments are struggling to keep track of the coronavirus and are unable to perform enough tests. Laboratories are often unable to process test results quickly, with the "turnaround" time in South Africa, the most advanced African economy, being around 12 days. According to the *Economist ,* in June, "African countries had tested, on average, fewer than 1,700 people per 1 million, a fraction of the number in rich countries (America had done 26 times more per million people)."

While South Africa has carried out more than 1 million tests—far more than most African countries—this is well below what is required. The *Economist* noted that Nigeria with a capacity for at least 10,000 tests per day, has carried out fewer than 900 a day since its first case at the end of February.

The claim that there is not enough money for health care is a lie. In the wake of the George Floyd murder by the police in the US, which has sparked protests in many African countries, African governments continue to spend on the military and the police in preparation for mounting opposition in the working class.

Zimbabwean doctor Norman Matara told Human Rights Watch, "When you look at the defence budget, they buy state-of-the-art military equipment, so this is not about poverty; it is about genuine political commitment."

President Emmerson Mnangagwa's administration, which came to power in Zimbabwe through a military coup in 2017, bought 50,000 mortar bombs and 58,500 grenades last

year. Nigeria recently bought $152 million worth of military equipment from China, including VT-4 main battle tanks, SH-5 self-propelled howitzers and other equipment to strengthen its land forces in the fight against Boko Haram militants in the north east of the country. Lieutenant General Lamidi Adeosun, the Nigerian Army Chief of Policy and Plans, stated that this was "just a tip of the iceberg."

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