

South Africa braces for coronavirus lockdown

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South Africa braced for a nationwide military-patrolled lockdown Thursday, joining other African countries imposing strict curfews and shutdowns in an attempt to halt the spread of the coronavirus across the continent.

Some 57 million people will be restricted to their homes during South

Africa's three-week total lockdown which begins at midnight.

Kenya, Rwanda and Mali are some of the African countries that have imposed restrictions to curb the spread of the coronavirus with the continent's confirmed cases creeping towards 3,000 and more than 70 deaths so far.

Although Africa's toll is far lower than in Europe, the United States and the Middle East, health experts say the world's poorest continent is especially vulnerable and the figures likely fall far short of the reality.

Donning camouflage uniform complete with a cap, President Cyril Ramaphosa saw off soldiers before they deployed from a military base in Soweto township.

"I send you out to go and defend our people against coronavirus," Ramaphosa said.

"This is unprecedented, not only in our democracy but also in the history of our country, that we will have a lockdown for 21 days to go out and wage war against an invisible enemy coronavirus," he said.

During South Africa's shutdown there will be no jogging, dog-walking or sale of alcohol across the country, which has so far the highest number of detected infections in sub-Saharan Africa at 927 cases, with Ramaphosa projecting it could reach 1,500 "within a few days".

Nigeria's government warned Thursday that Africa's most populous nation could soon see an "exponential" increase in coronavirus infections unless contacts of confirmed cases are tracked down quicker.

'War against invisible enemy'

Kenya, which has 31 cases, on Thursday recorded its first death—a 66-year-old Kenyan man who had travelled from South Africa on March 13, the health ministry announced.

The east African country will begin a 1700 GMT to 0300 GMT curfew on Friday in a bid to curtail the spread.

In the Sahel, Burkina Faso, which last week recorded sub-Saharan Africa's first death, announced that eight towns, including the capital Ouagadougou, would be "quarantined" from Friday.

"Quarantined means that nobody will enter or leave the towns involved," the minister for communication, Remis Fulgance Dandjinou, said, adding that the measure would be applied for "two weeks."

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, authorities ordered a four-day "total confinement" in the capital Kinshasa, starting Saturday.

Hours before the start of South Africa's lockdown, panicky residents in economic hub Johannesburg stocked up on food, alcohol and other supplies with some large supermarkets running out of eggs and the staple maize meal powder.

Elsewhere, thousands of people crammed long-distance bus terminals to escape to the countryside to be with families, raising fears they would transmit the virus to the most vulnerable old who normally reside or retire to farms and villages.

At the behest of Ramaphosa, many South Africans observed two minutes of prayers or silent meditation on the eve of the lockdown.

"These are challenging times. We are traversing a path we have never travelled before. There are many amongst us who are fearful, uncertain

and vulnerable," the president said.

'Severe financial impact'

South Africa's Defence Minister Nosiviwe Mapisa-Nqakula warned "if people are not complying, they (the military) may be forced to take extraordinary measures."

Violation of any of the regulations will carry a six-month jail sentence or fine in South Africa.

Two men have already been charged with attempted murder for defying a quarantine order and allegedly going out after they tested positive for the coronavirus, exposing others to the infection.

Moody's Investors Service warned Friday that the effect of border closures, commodity price declines and financial market volatility due to the pandemic will have "severe macroeconomic and financial impact on African sovereigns".

In one early indication of the likely impact of the pandemic on Africa's economy, rubber processors in Ivory Coast—the continent's largest producer—said they were bracing for losses of around \$100 million a month as its biggest clients in Asia, Europe and America, shut down.

"The progressive impact of this will be a slowdown in rubber processing activity, even a closedown," said Eugene Kremien, president of industry association Apromac.

"Our industry is already suffering, and it's just the start."

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