South Africa announces lockdown as coronavirus spreads

23 March 2020

South Africa on Monday announced a three-week lockdown with soldiers patrolling the streets to ensure compliance as more countries in the continent reported coronavirus fatalities and the disease spread.

President Cyril Ramaphosa said the government had "decided to enforce a nationwide lockdown for 21 days" from midnight Thursday to "avoid a human catastrophe."

There have been more than 400 coronavirus cases in Africa's most developed economy—the highest in sub-Saharan Africa—with the number climbing six-fold in just eight days.

Ramaphosa said the numbers could spiral given that South Africa has "a large number of people with suppressed immunity because of high HIV and TB and high levels of poverty and malnutrition."

"This is a decisive measure to save millions of South Africans from infection," he said. "Without decisive action, the number of people infected will rapidly increase... to hundreds of thousands."

Ramaphosa said the army would patrol the streets along with the police to ensure the ban is respected.

More African countries were expected to announce tough confinement measures after sealing their borders and closing public places.

DR Congo locked down its second city Lubumbashi for 48 hours on Monday and deployed security forces. Streets were deserted and stores were closed, an AFP journalist said.

The move came after two people with suspected coronavirus arrived on Sunday on a scheduled flight from the capital Kinshasa.

Fast-track tests were carried out on them and the results were positive.

"A 48-hour-long total confinement has been declared over all Haut-Katanga province as of Monday," Governor Jacques Kyabula said in a statement.

The measure "will enable the authorities to identify the other passengers aboard this plane for quarantining," he said.

The plane was carrying 77 passengers, the authorities said.

The DRC has recorded 30 cases of coronavirus since March 10, two of them fatalities.

Rising cases

Africa has been slow to follow the terrifying rise in virus cases seen in the Middle East and Europe.

The reason for this is unclear, but many African countries have used the precious time to impose travel restrictions, close schools and appeal for social distancing.

However, the numbers are now rising significantly.

According to a toll compiled by AFP, the number of known cases across the continent—including North Africa—stood at more than 1,600 on Monday, of which some 50 have been fatal.

The first detected case south of the Sahara was announced in the Nigerian city of Lagos on February 28, and the first death was reported in the Sahel state of Burkina Faso last Wednesday.

It was then followed by fatalities in Gabon, the DRC and Mauritius.

On Monday, three more countries were added to

this list: Nigeria—the most populous country in Africa—as well as The Gambia in western Africa, and Zimbabwe in the south.

All three deaths were of individuals who had arrived after making extensive trips abroad.

The Nigerian fatality was a 67-year-old man who had returned from medical treatment in Britain and had cancer and diabetes, the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control said.

The death in The Gambia was of an itinerant 70-year-old teacher from Bangladesh who had arrived from neighbouring Senegal.

In Zimbabwe, the ministry of health reported the death of a 30-year-old man who had travelled to New York last month and returned home on March 9, transiting through Johannesburg in neighbouring South Africa.

Peril for Africa

Ghana on Monday closed schools and universities and suspended public events, while in Burkina Faso, a security source said the authorities "were thinking more and more about total confinement of the population for two or three weeks."

Rwanda late Saturday barred all "non-essential" movement, Gabon imposed night curfew, while the Indian Ocean island of Mauritius began a 14-day lockdown on Friday.

Health experts have sounded loud and repeated warnings about Africa's vulnerability to coronavirus.

Crowded shantytowns, poor sanitation and decrepit health infrastructure offer ideal opportunities for the lethal microbe.

"The system itself is overstretched and inadequate to deal with a coronavirus epidemic," Zimbabwean doctor Norman Matara told AFP last week.

He said there were only eight functioning intensive care and two isolation units in the whole of his country.

But lockdowns too can have a catastrophic in countries where there is little or no social safety net to help people buy food or pay their bills.

"In reality, partial or total confinement could have disastrous effects for the African continent," Cameroonian writer Calixthe Beyala said on her Facebook page.

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