

African COVID deaths top 100,000

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Africa on Thursday recorded more than 100,000 deaths from COVID-19, a grim milestone likely to understate the real toll, as the continent of 1.2 billion people battles a second wave of infections.

The 54 countries in the region have a death toll of 100,000 from 3,793,660 reported cases, according to an AFP tally.

The continent, relatively spared by the pandemic, is the last except Oceania to reach the threshold of 100,000 deaths, which Europe crossed in April 2020.

South Africa—the worst hit African country—rolled out a mass testing campaign at the start of the pandemic.

To date, the country has recorded nearly 1.5 million cases and more than 48,000 deaths.

But those figures, based on daily reports communicated by health authorities, only reflect a fraction of the actual case load, health specialists say.

"The cases are clearly under-reported because of poor access to healthcare facilities and under-

reporting of milder cases," South African virologist Barry Schoub, also a member of the Scientific Council at the South African Ministry of Health told AFP.

Understaffed health facilities and lack of means have meant many African countries have been unable to do mass testing.

"Many countries have mainly PCR tests in the capitals. And the further one moves away from the urban centres, the less there are tests," explained French epidemiologist Emmanuel Baron from Doctors Without Borders.

"It is a disease that can go unnoticed with asymptomatic patients, or with symptoms that can be confused with others," he added.

COVID found in pawpaw

In Zimbabwe, a country with a devastated economy and mismanaged health system, hospitals are filled with COVID patients, exhausted doctors and overwhelmed nurses. But the official number of cases remains low.

Tanzania stopped testing in May 2020 after claiming it had found a positive COVID case in a pawpaw, a quail and even a goat. The Tanzanian government last released official figures in April.

"If someone had told me a year ago that we, as a continent, would see 100,000 deaths from this infection, I probably would not have believed it," John Nkengasong, the Africa Director of the Centers for Disease Control and Preventions (CDC), told reporters on Thursday.

The toll in Africa is, however, significantly lower than in Europe, the world's most affected region, with 818,912 deaths recorded so far. The other regions that are badly hit are Latin America with 649,006 deaths and the United States and Canada 512,295 deaths.

After a sharp increase in January, Africa's figures have fallen sharply in the past few weeks. Over the last seven days, the continent recorded 3,054 deaths, a drop of 18 percent from the previous week.

At the height of the pandemic in January, the continent had 906 deaths per day.

No disaster

While coronavirus figures are clearly underestimated, "we have not seen a health disaster in Africa to date", said Baron.

Several studies on antibodies, which make it possible to detect whether a person who is recovered has previously been exposed to the virus, are underway in many African countries and should provide a better idea of the impact of the pandemic in the region.

South Africa, where almost all of the latest cases are attributed to a variant of the virus known to be more contagious and which has spread widely, represents nearly half of the deaths and reported cases on the continent.

The other African countries that are most affected are Egypt (10,150 deaths from 175,677 cases) and Morocco (8,524 deaths from 480,056 cases).

South Africa is also the country with most COVID-19 fatalities on the continent, counting 82 deaths per 100,000 inhabitants, ahead of Tunisia (65 deaths) and Eswatini (55).

Lagging behind in the vaccination race, the continent's leading industrial powerhouse administered its first vaccines on Wednesday.

Globally, COVID-19 has caused more than 109 million infections and over 2.4 million deaths since the start of the epidemic in Wuhan in China in December 2019.

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