

Lagos closes schools as virus shadow lengthens over Africa

March 19 2020

Sub-Saharan Africa's biggest city, Lagos, announced on Thursday it would shut schools and limit religious gatherings to help fight the spread of coronavirus.

The curbs by Nigeria's sprawling economic hub came a day after Burkina Faso announced the first virus fatality south of the Sahara.

"After consulting with our [healthcare professionals](#) over COVID-19, we are closing down schools and limiting religious gathering," Lagos state governor Babajide Sanwo-Olu wrote on Twitter.

"We are limiting gatherings and events to no more than 50 people and appropriate social distancing must be observed."

The state government said schools in the city of some 20 million people would be shut from Monday.

Africa's most populous nation—home to around 200 million people—has so far recorded just 12 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and is following other countries on the continent in ratcheting up its response to the global pandemic.

The central government on Wednesday announced an entry ban on 13 countries worst-hit by the new [coronavirus](#).

Nigeria, which is also Africa's largest oil producer, has also said it will

slash billions of dollars in budget spending because of a collapse in crude prices.

Enforcement problem

Imposing the new restrictions on the chaotic and overcrowded streets of Lagos will be a major challenge for the authorities.

The city is home to an array of so-called "megachurches" where thousands of worshippers typically gather each weekend for services.

Meanwhile, the Sahel state of Burkina Faso, which on Wednesday reported the first death from coronavirus in sub-Saharan Africa, said the number of detected cases had risen to 35.

The national coordinator for the fight against the disease, Martial Ouedraogo, said Thursday most of the infections had been reported in the capital Ouagadougou.

Others were in Hounde 250 kilometres (155 miles) away and in Bobo Dioulasso, the country's second largest city.

"The spread is in peaks and troughs," Ouedraogo told reporters.

On Wednesday, Ouedraogo said the tally of cases stood at 27, including a fatality—a 62-year-old female legislator who had been suffering from diabetes.

Coronavirus has been slow to spread—or be detected—in sub-Saharan Africa, which experts fear is deeply vulnerable to the disease.

Africa—north and south of the Sahara—has had 712 known cases of the virus, according to a tally compiled by AFP.

Health specialists say the continent is a potential breeding ground for the virus, given poor sanitation, poverty, urban over-crowding and creaking medical systems.

Border fence and mercy flights

In the south of the continent, South Africa reported its case total had leapt from 116 to 150.

The government declared it would erect or repair 40 kilometres (25 miles) of fence on its border with Zimbabwe to help tamp viral spread.

"This is to ensure that no undocumented or infected persons cross into the country and vice-versa," said Public Works Minister Patricia de Lille.

In West Africa, Sierra Leone said it would suspend all flights incoming and outgoing from Saturday until further notice.

The former British colony was badly hit by the 2014-2016 West Africa Ebola outbreak, which killed almost 4,000 people in the country.

Senegal, however, authorised six exceptional flights by Air France and Air Senegal to pick up stranded travellers in Dakar and fly them to Paris, the French embassy said.

President Macky Sall has also called on his ministers to make a voluntary contribution of one million CFA francs (\$1,700, 1,500 euros) each to a national solidarity fund, a spokesman told AFP.

Despite deepening concern in the region, Mali said a much-delayed parliamentary poll—whose first round is due to take place on March 29, with a runoff on April 19—will take place as scheduled.

The elections have been postponed several times since 2018 because of jihadist violence.

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