

S.Africa reports first two virus deaths as lockdown starts

March 27 2020

South Africa recorded its first two deaths from coronavirus on Friday as its infection tally breached the 1,000 mark just hours after a three-week nationwide lockdown took effect.

The news came as World Health Organisation director for Africa warned of a "dramatic evolution" of the disease which has, according to AFP tally, killed 94 out of nearly 3,500 infected people across the world's poorest continent.

South Africa, which has the highest number of confirmed cases at 1,170, recorded its first deaths on Friday.

"This morning we wake South Africans up with sad news that we now have our first deaths resulting from COVID-19," Health Minister Zweli Mkhize said in a statement.

President Cyril Ramaphosa has ordered South Africa's 57 million people to stay at home for 21 days, joining countries across the globe in imposing strict measures to halt the spread of the disease.

But many people especially from the poor neighbourhoods, defied the order after it came into effect at midnight Thursday, lining up outside food stores or at bus terminals.

The streets of Alexandra, a Johannesburg township, were buzzing with people and traffic as if it was a normal, busy Friday afternoon.

Earlier on Friday, police appeared overwhelmed in downtown Johannesburg, where hundreds of shoppers tried to force their way into a supermarket.

"The lockdown is a good thing for the country, even though I feel that a lot of people are taking it for granted, saying this virus is not for us... which is bad because by the time we wake up this thing will have spread enormously in the country," said bank employee Dumisani July, 39, wearing a mask and black latex gloves.

The two people died in the Western Cape province, women aged 28 and 48, local administrators said.

The tally of infections in Africa's biggest industrialised economy could reach 1,500 "within a few days", according to Ramaphosa.

'Dramatic evolution'

Although Africa's toll is far lower than in the United States, Europe and the Middle East, experts say the world's poorest continent is especially vulnerable, given its poor sanitation, weak healthcare systems, overcrowding and conflicts.

WHO Africa boss Matshidiso Moeti said there have been about 300 new cases per day in recent days, and called for "intensified action by African countries".

"The situation is very worrying, with a dramatic evolution: an increase geographically in the number of countries and also an increase in the number of infections," Moeti told France24 channel.

Sending off troops to enforce the lockdown on Thursday, Ramaphosa said "this is unprecedented,... that we will have a lockdown for 21 days

to go out and wage war against an invisible enemy coronavirus".

During the shutdown, jogging, dog-walking and the sale of alcohol are banned.

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

At least 55 people were arrested across the country for violating liquor prohibition regulations, said Police Minister Bheki Cele.

Virus reaches eastern DR Congo

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, the country's pointman on the pandemic said the first case of coronavirus had been detected outside Kinshasa—an individual in the restive eastern province of Ituri, which was also touched by a now-waning epidemic of Ebola.

As of Thursday, the DRC had 54 cases, four of them fatalities, said crisis coordinator Jean-Jacques Muyembe.

The DRC's sprawling capital, Kinshasa, goes into lockdown on Saturday for four days, followed by two days to allow residents to shop followed by another four-day lockdown, in a rotation to be continued over three weeks.

A citizens' movement called Lucha has criticised the move as "senseless" adding "the only thing that can result is a humanitarian catastrophe or riots."

Two shot in Uganda

In East Africa, Ugandan police said two men were in hospital after being shot for violating transport restrictions imposed to curb the virus.

"Police officers on duty to enforce a presidential directive stopped two men on a motorbike in Mukono (near Kampala) on Thursday," Uganda metropolitan police spokesman, Patrick Onyango told AFP.

"They attacked one of the officers, he fired the warning shot in the air but they charged at him and he shot one of them in the leg and another in the stomach."

President Yoweri Museveni has not ordered a shutdown, but urged people to stay home. Kenya and Rwanda in the region have also imposed restrictions.

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 for two weeks from Friday.

In Mali, the government has imposed some anti-coronavirus measures, including a night-time curfew, but said a long-delayed parliamentary election would go ahead on Sunday.

The impoverished state has scheduled the elections as a means to win back public confidence in its political system as it battles a raging jihadist revolt.

South Africa-based risk analysis firm, NKC African Economics warned that tough restrictions on mobility will be difficult to enforce in Africa.

"Most African countries will not be able to effectively implement the severe restrictions on movement that we have seen globally," it said.

"The impracticality of implementing widespread self-quarantine in shantytowns or informal settlements means that this will not be an option.

"Mismanagement of the situation could lead to human costs far exceeding economic losses."

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