Virus prevention measures turn violent in parts of Africa

March 28 2020, by Cara Anna

South African National Defence Forces take up positions outside the hostel in a densely populated Alexandra township east of Johannesburg, South Africa, Saturday, March 28, 2020. South Africa went into a nationwide lockdown for 21 days in an effort to control the spread of the COVID-19 coronavirus. The new coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms for most people, but for some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness or death. (AP Photo/Themba Hadebe)

Police fired tear gas at a crowd of Kenyan ferry commuters as the country's first day of a coronavirus curfew slid into chaos. Elsewhere, officers were captured in mobile phone footage whacking people with batons.

Virus prevention measures have taken a violent turn in parts of Africa as countries impose lockdowns and curfews or seal off major cities. Health experts say the virus' spread, though still at an early stage, resembles the arc seen in Europe, adding to widespread anxiety. Cases across Africa were set to climb above 4,000 late Saturday.

Abuses of the new measures by authorities are an immediate concern.

Minutes after South Africa's three-week lockdown began Friday, police screamed at homeless people in downtown Johannesburg and went after some with batons. Some citizens reported the police use of rubber bullets. Fifty-five people across the country were arrested. The country leads Africa with more than 1,000 cases.

In an apparent show of force on Saturday, South Africa's military raided a large workers' hostel in the Alexandra township where some residents had defied the lockdown.

In Rwanda, the first country in sub-Saharan Africa to impose a lockdown, police have denied that two civilians shot dead Monday were killed for defying the new measures, saying the men attacked an officer after being stopped.

Ferry passengers flee from police firing tear gas, after new measures aimed at halting the spread of the new coronavirus instead caused a crowd to form outside the ferry in Mombasa, Kenya Friday, March 27, 2020. The new measures required public transport vehicles to drop passengers 1km away and walk to the ferry terminal and then queue, but passengers fearing they would get stuck before a 7pm curfew started crowding to get on causing police to fire tear gas and round up the passengers. (AP Photo)

And Zimbabwe, where police are widely criticized by [human rights groups](link) for deadly crackdowns, is set to enter a three-week lockdown on Monday. The country's handful of virus cases already threatens to overwhelm one of the world's most fragile health systems.

In Kenya, outrage over the the actions of police was swift.

"We were horrified by excessive use of police force" ahead of the curfew that began Friday night, Amnesty International Kenya and 19 other human rights groups said in a statement issued Saturday. "We continue to receive testimonies from victims, eyewitnesses and video footage showing police gleefully assaulting members of the public in other parts of the country."

The tear gas caused hundreds of people trying to reach a ferry in the port city of Mombasa ahead of the overnight curfew to touch their faces as they vomited, spat and wiped away tears, increasing the chance of the virus' spread, the rights groups said.

A soldier watches homeless people who were rounded up in downtown Johannesburg Friday, March 27, 2020, after South Africa went into a nationwide

lockdown for 21 days in an effort to mitigate the spread to the coronavirus. The new coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms for most people, but for some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness or death. (AP Photo)
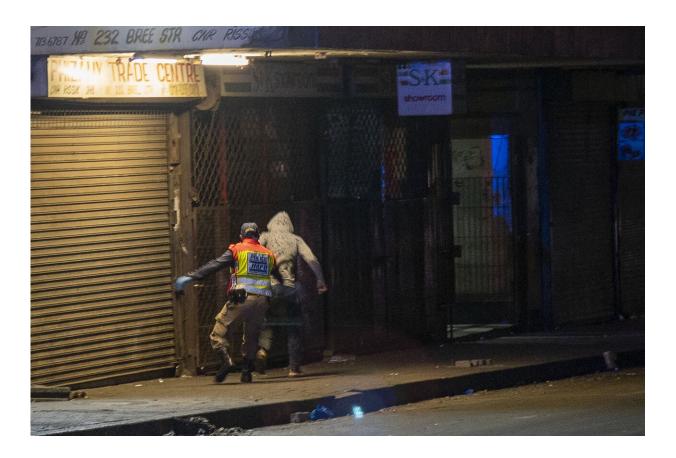
Even some health workers reported being intimidated by police officers as they tried to provide services after the curfew, the statement added.

"I am appealing to our people to make it very unnecessary for them to engage with police by staying at home," Kenya's Cabinet secretary for health, Mutahi Kagwe, said in a statement. "I am also urging the police that people must be treated humanely." The country has 38 virus cases.

Kenya's interior ministry on Saturday replied to criticism in a statement saying the curfew "is meant to guard against an apparent threat to public health. Breaking it is not only irresponsible but also puts others in harm's way."

Kenya's government has not said how many people have been arrested. Because courts are also affected by virus prevention measures, all but serious cases will now be dealt with at police stations, the government has said. That means anyone detained for violating curfew faces time in crowded cells.
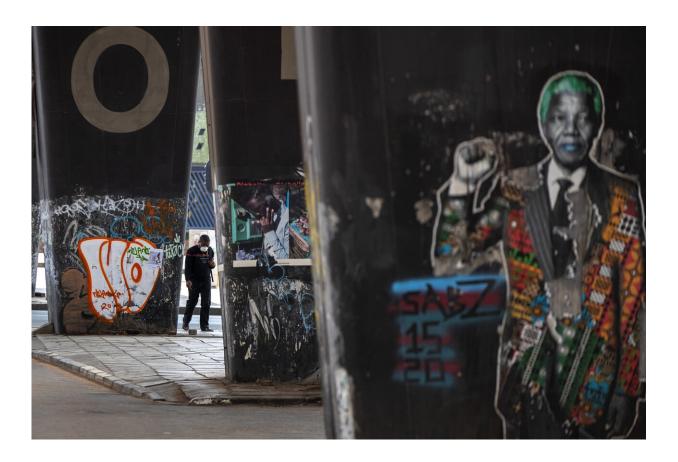
A police officer chases a man who violated the lockdown downtown Johannesburg, South Africa, Friday, March 27, 2020. Police and army started patrolling moments after South Africa went into a nationwide lockdown for 21 days in an effort to mitigate the spread to the coronavirus. The new coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms for most people, but for some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness or death.(AP Photo/Jerome Delay)

South African National Defense Forces patrol the Men's Hostel in the densely populated Alexandra township east of Johannesburg, Saturday, March 28, 2020, enforcing a strict lockdown in an effort to control the spread of the coronavirus. The new coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms for most people, but for some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness or death.(AP Photo/Jerome Delay)

A man wearing a face masks walks on the street at Maboneng in Johannesburg, South Africa, Saturday, March 28, 2020. South Africa went into a nationwide lockdown for 21 days in an effort to control the spread of the COVID-19 coronavirus. The new coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms for most people, but for some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness or death. (AP Photo/Themba Hadebe)

A hostel dweller watches on the South African National Defense Forces take positions ouside the hostel in a densely populated Alexandra township east of Johannesburg, South Africa, Saturday, March 28, 2020. South Africa went into a nationwide lockdown for 21 days in an effort to control the spread of the COVID-19 coronavirus. The new coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms for most people, but for some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness or death. (AP Photo/Themba Hadebe)
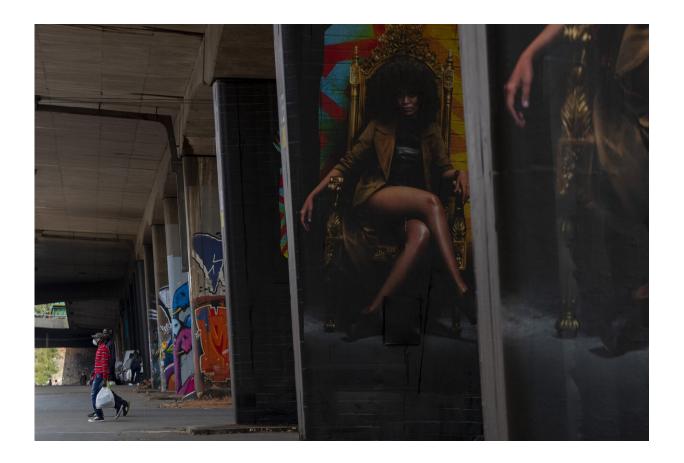
A man carrying a bag on his had crosses the street as the South African National Defence Forces patrol a densely populated Alexandra township east of Johannesburg, South Africa, Saturday, March 28, 2020. South Africa went into a nationwide lockdown for 21 days in an effort to control the spread of the COVID-19 coronavirus. The new coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms for most people, but for some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness or death. (AP Photo/Themba Hadebe)

Residents of the Men's Hostel in the densely populated Alexandra township east of Johannesburg look at a deployment of South African National Defense Forces surrounding them Saturday, March 28, 2020. South Africa went into a nationwide lockdown for 21 days in an effort to control the spread of the COVID-19 coronavirus. The new coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms for most people, but for some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness or death. (AP Photo/Jerome Delay)

A man wearing a face mask walks on the street at Maboneng in Johannesburg, South Africa, Saturday, March 28, 2020. South Africa went into a nationwide lockdown for 21 days in an effort to control the spread of the COVID-19 coronavirus. The new coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms for most people, but for some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness or death. (AP Photo/Themba Hadebe)

Kenyan police hold back ferry passengers after new measures aimed at halting the spread of the new coronavirus instead caused a crowd to form outside the ferry in Mombasa, Kenya Friday, March 27, 2020. The new measures required public transport vehicles to drop passengers 1km away and walk to the ferry terminal and then queue, but passengers fearing they would get stuck before a 7pm curfew started crowding to get on causing police to fire tear gas and round up the passengers. (AP Photo)

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South African National Defense Forces patrol the densely populated Alexandra township east of Johannesburg Friday, March 27, 2020. South Africa went into a nationwide lockdown for 21 days in an effort to mitigate the spread to the coronavirus, but in Alexandra, many people were gathering in the streets disregarding the lockdown. The new coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms for most people, but for some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness or death.(AP Photo/Jerome Delay)

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A view of the empty popular Sea Point promenade in Cape Town, South Africa, Saturday, March 28, 2020, on the second day of South Africa's nationwide lockdown in an effort to control the spread of the coronavirus. The new coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms for most people, but for some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness or death. (AP Photo/Nardus Engelbrecht)

South African Defense Forces patrol downtown Johannesburg, South Africa, Friday, March 27, 2020. Police and army started patrolling moments after South Africa went into a nationwide lockdown for 21 days in an effort to mitigate the spread to the coronavirus. The new coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms for most people, but for some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness or death.(AP Photo/Jerome Delay)

A man pushing a shopping cart with food on the street as South African National Defence Forces drive through a densely populated Alexandra township east of Johannesburg, South Africa, Saturday, March 28, 2020. South Africa went into a nationwide lockdown for 21 days in an effort to control the spread of the COVID-19 coronavirus. The new coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms for most people, but for some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness or death. (AP Photo/Themba Hadebe)

An empty street at Maboneng precinct in Johannesburg, South Africa, Saturday, March 28, 2020. South Africa went into a nationwide lockdown for 21 days in an effort to control the spread of the coronavirus. The new coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms for most people, but for some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness or death. (AP Photo/Themba Hadebe)

A policeman orders a loitering man to get home while patrolling in Mannenburg, Cape Town, South Africa, Saturday, March 28, 2020. South Africa went into a nationwide lockdown to restrict public movements for 21 days in an effort to control the spread of the COVID-19 coronavirus. (AP Photo)

Soldiers interact with resident while on patrol in Mannenburg, Cape Town, South Africa Saturday, March 28, 2020. South Africa went into a nationwide lockdown to restrict public movements for 21 days in an effort to control the spread of the virulent COVID-19 coronavirus.(AP Photo)

Residents look from their apartment windows reacting to the photographer outside, in Mannenburg, Cape Town, South Africa Saturday, March 28, 2020. South Africa went into a nationwide lockdown to restrict public movements for 21 days in an effort to control the spread of the COVID-19 coronavirus. (AP Photo)

Residents of the Yeoville neighborhood of Johannesburg queue to enter a grocery store Saturday, March 28, 2020. South Africa went into a nationwide lockdown for 21 days in an effort to control the spread of the coronavirus. The COVID-19 coronavirus symptoms can include fever and cough but some suffer more severe symptoms like pneumonia and sometimes requiring hospitalization. (AP Photo/Jerome Delay)

Residents of the Yeoville neighborhood of Johannesburg queue to enter a grocery store Saturday, March 28, 2020. South Africa went into a nationwide lockdown for 21 days in an effort to control the spread of the highly contagious COVID-19 coronavirus. (AP Photo/Jerome Delay)

The Law Society of Kenya will go to court to challenge the curfew on the grounds that it is unconstitutional and has been abused by police, president Nelson Havi said in a statement. The penalty for breaking a curfew is not corporal punishment, he added.

"It is evident that COVID-19 will be spread more by actions of police than of those claimed to have contravened the curfew," Havi said.

For most people, the new coronavirus causes mild or moderate

symptoms, such as fever and cough that clear up in two to three weeks. For some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness, including pneumonia, and death.

If Kenya goes further and imposes a lockdown, "there is bound to be violence," said James Shikwati, an economist. People in poor neighborhoods of cities like the capital, Nairobi, will need a way to access food, water and sanitation.

"It will mean for the first day, maybe, they stay indoors," he said. "Then the second day, when they are hungry, they will move out."