

Coronavirus surges in Djibouti as population ignores measures

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Djibouti has seen a rapid spike in coronavirus cases, with the Horn of Africa nation now recording the highest prevalence on the continent as the population largely ignores measures imposed by authorities.

The tiny but strategically important country that hosts major US and French military bases has recorded 999 positive cases—small on a global scale, but the highest in East Africa. Two people have died.

This is largely due to testing. Djibouti, with a population of around one million, has conducted more than 11,000 tests—a similar number to neighbouring Ethiopia, which has more than 100 million people.

But more alarming than the figure itself is the runaway rate of multiplication: in just two weeks, Djibouti has recorded a seven-fold increase in cases.

The Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention on Thursday said that with 98.6 cases per 100,000 people, Djibouti has the highest prevalence on the continent.

Authorities have conceded the virus has not been successfully contained since a nationwide lockdown was imposed on March 23, when Djibouti had just two recorded cases of COVID-19.

"The epidemic is getting worse," the [health ministry](#) said last week.

The inability to control the outbreak has irritated Djibouti's powerful President Ismail Omar Guelleh, who has ruled since succeeding his uncle in 1999, and is not bound by [term limits](#).

"The confinement has not been respected by everyone, and unfortunately many of our compatriots still take this disease lightly," Guelleh said in a televised address to the nation this week.

"You continue to circulate, not observing minimum distances, not isolating yourselves, and spreading the disease."

Lockdown ignored

As the pandemic swept the globe, Djibouti—which the democracy advocacy group Freedom House ranked "not free" on its 2020 index measuring political rights and civil liberties—ordered its citizens to remain home.

Only those working in essential industries were allowed outside, and public transport was banned to curtail movement.

The small nation wedged between Somalia and Eritrea, and landlocked Ethiopia's gateway to the coastline, also closed its borders as well as schools, places of worship and all but the most necessary shops.

But crowds continue to throng the capital city and few wear masks or are stopped by police or soldiers on patrol, an AFP journalist said.

No health measures were witnessed at busy markets selling fruit, vegetables and khat, a chewed narcotic leaf popular in the region.

"If behaviour doesn't change I will take even tougher measures," said Guelleh, who has crushed past rallies against his rule and curbed

Djibouti's free press, civil society and [political opposition](#).

"This could go as far as a curfew, which would be the only way to stop the spread of this virus."

Horn of Africa expert Benedikt Kamski said the government had acted fast in taking measures to curb the virus, but was approaching it "with caution and strategically".

Police placed on street corners have so far generally tried to "talk" people back into their houses rather than employing more brutal means of enforcement.

"There is a huge difference between the government showing force for political or economic reasons throughout the year in normal times, compared to now handling this global health crisis," Kamski said.

He noted that Djibouti's government was well aware it is in the spotlight due to the number of foreigners based there, and the high number of cases.

He also pointed out that the challenge of enforcing a strict lockdown was seen across the continent, with governments struggling to confine [poor people](#) living in crowded conditions and surviving off what they can make that day.

Djibouti's restrictions have been extended until April 28 but few can afford to hold out that long.

Three-quarters of Djiboutians live on less than \$3 a day and unemployment sat at nearly 50 percent when measured in 2017.

Anger at authorities

The [coronavirus](#) epidemic has also provoked criticism of Guelleh, who could run for the presidency again next year after term limits were abolished in a constitutional change.

Authorities came under fire for a debacle at the Al-Rahma hospital in Balbala, where several patients were infected by two Egyptian doctors who had recently returned to Djibouti.

Some of those with COVID-19 were then transferred to another health facility in the country's south—where more were infected.

The swift imposition of the lockdown without warning also bred resentment.

"We weren't ready at all. I wasn't prepared, because from one day to the next, we were told the country was being confined," Ahmed, a rickshaw driver, told AFP.

"For people like me, who live from daily work, it's difficult financially."

At the start of this month, Guelleh announced an emergency fund of one billion Djiboutian francs (\$5.6 million), promising 10 million francs from his own purse.

The government says food distributions in poorer neighbourhoods have reached thousands of families. But even this initiative was overshadowed by allegations of patronage and favouritism.

Authorities face another challenge in Ramadan, which started Thursday in the overwhelmingly Muslim-majority nation, and normally would draw huge crowds to pray. The closure of mosques has been viewed with suspicion among some of the country's more pious.

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