

# Virus could 'smolder' in Africa, cause many deaths, says WHO

May 8 2020, by Andrew Meldrum

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Members of a team dedicated to burying Muslim victims of the new coronavirus spray disinfectant into the grave before burying Mohamed Ali Hassan, whose cousin said had been unaware he had the new coronavirus and died in his house in the Eastleigh area, at the Langata Muslim cemetery in Nairobi, Kenya Thursday, May 7, 2020. The Kenyan government on Wednesday sealed off the Eastleigh area of the capital Nairobi and the Old Town area of the port city of Mombasa, with no movement permitted in or out for 15 days, due to "a surge in the number of positive coronavirus cases". (AP Photo/Brian Inganga)

The coronavirus could "smolder" in Africa for years and take a high death toll across the continent, the World Health Organization has warned.

The [virus](#) is spreading in Africa, but so far the continent has not seen a dramatic explosion in the number of confirmed cases.

More than 52,000 confirmed infections and 2,074 virus-related deaths have been reported by African countries, according to figures released Friday by the Africa Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The total number of cases has risen by more than 42% in the past week.

The disease appears to be spreading more slowly across Africa than in Europe, according to the WHO report. Officials say that could be due to poor surveillance or less developed transport links.

"While COVID-19 likely won't spread as exponentially in Africa as it has elsewhere in the world, it likely will smolder in transmission hotspots," said Dr. Matshidiso Moeti, WHO's regional director for Africa who is based in Brazzaville, Republic of Congo. She said outbreaks would likely peak about one month after the virus starts spreading widely in communities.

"COVID-19 could become a fixture in our lives for the next several years unless a proactive approach is taken by many governments in the region. We need to test, trace, isolate and treat," Moeti said in a video call.



A woman opens her mouth for a health worker to collect a sample for coronavirus testing during the screening and testing campaign aimed to combat the spread of COVID-19, in Diepsloot, north Johannesburg, Friday, May 8, 2020. (AP Photo/Themba Hadebe)

The WHO estimated that if no containment measures are taken, COVID-19 could cause deaths ranging from 83,000 to 190,000 people in Africa in the first year of the pandemic. As many as 44 million of the continent's 1.3 billion people could be infected during the same period, the U.N. health agency estimated, based on its prediction model of 47 African countries.

But the projected number of infections and deaths is based on the assumption that no containment measures are taken. In fact, 43 African



countries have implemented measures to reduce the spread of the virus, ranging from nationwide lockdowns to restrictions in [major cities](#) to curfews, closed schools and banned public gatherings.

Africa, which has most of its population under 20 years old, may be experiencing a slower rate of transmission, less severe cases and less deaths because the virus is known to affect the elderly at a much deadlier rate.



A woman wearing a face mask as a precaution against the spread of the new coronavirus, walks along the street in Katlehong, east of Johannesburg, South Africa, Wednesday, May 6, 2020. South Africa began a phased easing of its strict lockdown measures on May 1, and its confirmed cases of coronavirus continue to increase as more people are being tested. (AP Photo/Themba

Hadebe)



Security personnel measure the temperature of a man before depositing his recycle material for cash at the entrance of a depot in downtown Johannesburg, South Africa, Thursday, May 7, 2020. South Africa began a phased easing of its strict lockdown measures on May 1, and its confirmed cases of coronavirus continue to increase as more people are being tested. (AP Photo/Themba Hadebe)





A medical staff member takes the temperature of a metro police officer during a mass screening and testing campaign for COVID-19 in Johannesburg, South Africa, Thursday, May 7, 2020. South Africa begun a phased easing of its strict lockdown measures on May 1, and its confirmed cases of coronavirus continue to increase as more people are being tested. (AP Photo/Themba Hadebe)



Street vendors, wearing face masks as a precaution against the spread of the new coronavirus, sell fruit on the street corner in Katlehong, east of Johannesburg, South Africa, Wednesday, May 6, 2020. South Africa began a phased easing of its strict lockdown measures on May 1, and its confirmed cases of coronavirus continue to increase as more people are being tested. (AP Photo/Themba Hadebe)





Off duty metro police officers sit on the chairs whilst queuing to be screened and tested for COVID-19 in Johannesburg, South Africa, Thursday, May 7, 2020. South Africa begun a phased easing of its strict lockdown measures on May 1, and its confirmed cases of coronavirus continue to increase as more people are being tested. (AP Photo/Themba Hadebe)





A man wearing a face mask as a precaution against the spread of the new coronavirus, walks past a mural in downtown Johannesburg, South Africa, Thursday, May 7, 2020. South Africa begun a phased easing of its strict lockdown measures on May 1, and its confirmed cases of coronavirus continue to increase as more people are being tested. (AP Photo/Themba Hadebe)



A man opens his mouth for a health worker to collect a sample for coronavirus testing during the screening and testing campaign aimed to combat the spread of COVID-19 Diepsloot, north Johannesburg, South Africa, Friday, May 8, 2020. (AP Photo/Themba Hadebe)





Off duty metro police officers queue to be screened and tested for COVID-19 in Johannesburg, South Africa, Thursday, May 7, 2020. South Africa began a phased easing of its strict lockdown measures on May 1, and its confirmed cases of coronavirus continue to increase as more people are being tested. (AP Photo/Themba Hadebe)





A health worker demonstrates to the man before collecting a sample for coronavirus testing during the screening and testing campaign aimed to combat the spread of COVID-19 Diepsloot, north in Johannesburg, South Africa, Friday, May 8, 2020. (AP Photo/Themba Hadebe)



A man looks on through a an opening of a tent as a woman watches the heath worker explains the process of collecting a sample for coronavirus testing, during the screening and testing campaign aimed to combat the spread of COVID-19 Diepsloot, north in Johannesburg, South Africa, Friday, May 8, 2020. (AP Photo/Themba Hadebe)



A woman with her child listens as a health worker explains the process of collecting a sample for coronavirus testing, during the screening and testing campaign aimed to combat the spread of COVID-19 Diepsloot, north in Johannesburg, South Africa, Friday, May 8, 2020. (AP Photo/Themba Hadebe)





Members of a team dedicated to burying Muslim victims of the new coronavirus bury Mohamed Ali Hassan, whose cousin said had been unaware he had the new coronavirus and died in his house in the Eastleigh area at the Langata Muslim cemetery, in Nairobi, Kenya Thursday, May 7, 2020. The Kenyan government on Wednesday sealed off the Eastleigh area of the capital Nairobi and the Old Town area of the port city of Mombasa, with no movement permitted in or out for 15 days, due to "a surge in the number of positive coronavirus cases". (AP Photo/Brian Inganga)





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Members of a team dedicated to burying Muslim victims of the new coronavirus disinfect their tools after burying Mohamed Ali Hassan, whose cousin said had been unaware he had the new coronavirus and died in his house in the Eastleigh area at the Langata Muslim cemetery, in Nairobi, Kenya Thursday, May 7, 2020. The Kenyan government on Wednesday sealed off the Eastleigh area of the capital Nairobi and the Old Town area of the port city of Mombasa, with no movement permitted in or out for 15 days, due to "a surge in the number of positive coronavirus cases". (AP Photo/Brian Inganga)





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But Africa could see a more prolonged outbreak that lasts a few years, according to the study. Algeria, South Africa and Cameroon as well as several smaller African countries are at high risk if containment measures are not prioritized, it said.

As many as 5.5 million Africans could require hospitalization for COVID-19, which would severely strain the health resources of many countries, said the study.

Africa has an average of nine intensive care unit beds per 1 million people, according to a recent WHO survey. These would be "woefully inadequate," the new report said.

"The importance of promoting effective containment measures is crucial, as sustained and widespread transmission of the virus could severely overwhelm our health systems," said Dr. Moeti. "Curbing a large-scale outbreak is far costlier than the ongoing preventive measures that governments are undertaking to contain the spread of the virus."

Social distancing and frequent hand washing are key virus containment measures in Africa.

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