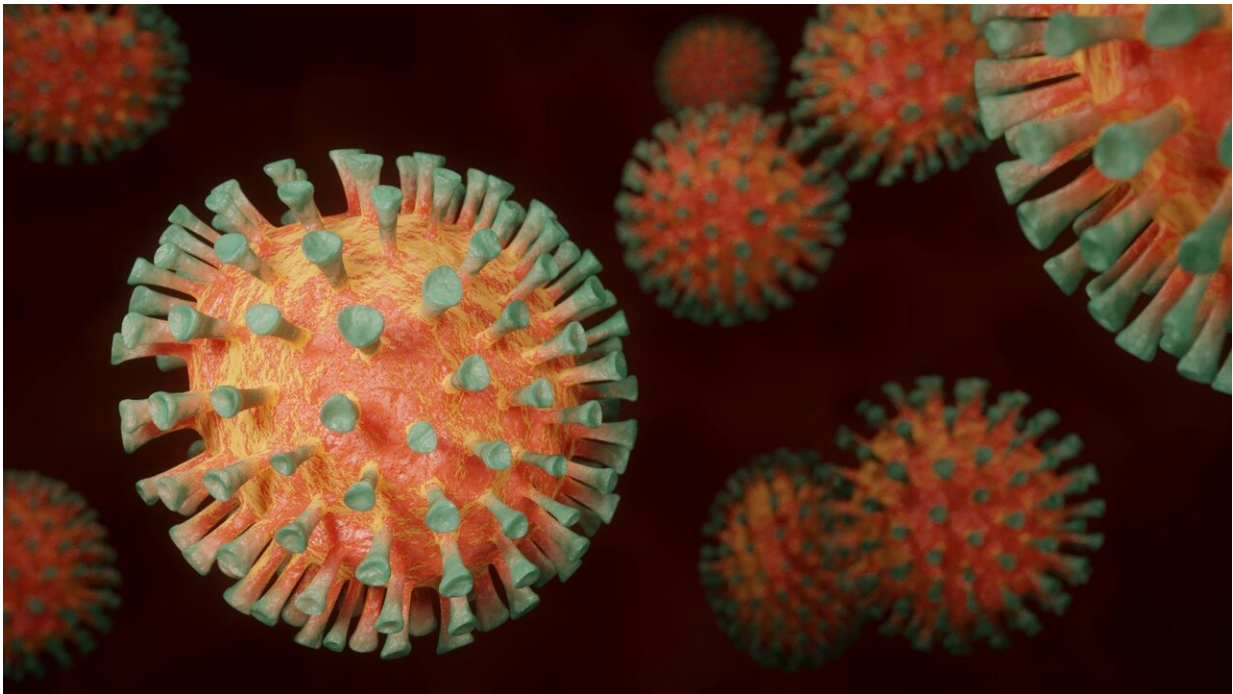


# Zimbabwe's COVID-19 fightback hamstrung by graft

March 22 2021

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Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

Zimbabwe's anti graft police last month recovered about 40 boxes of COVID-19 test kits worth thousands of dollars stolen from a public hospital in Bulawayo, the country's second city.

A donation from UNICEF, they had been stashed in a building opposite the central bank in the capital Harare and were destined for the black

market.

It was one of the latest cases of pandemic-related graft one year after the [coronavirus](#) surfaced in the country.

Zimbabwe recorded its first COVID case on March 20 last year and three-and-half months later the [health minister](#) was fired for corruption.

He was charged with irregularly awarding a foreign-based company a multi-million-dollar contract to supply personal protective equipment, test kits and drugs.

In addition, he was accused of trying to coerce the treasury to pay for 15,000 coronavirus test kits stored in Harare's international airport. After an inspection, only 3,700 kits were found.

As the southern African country started rolling out COVID jabs last month, questions are being raised about the vaccine procurement process.

The government has set aside \$100 million (83 million euros) for vaccines to inoculate 10 million of its 14.5 million population.

"People I have spoken to worry that there will be corruption, there will be looting of public funds," said Hopewell Chin'ono, a whistleblowing journalist whose reporting brought down the health minister.

## **'They loot' song goes viral**

In February, shortly after his release from prison - his third arrest in six months - the investigative journalist released a short reggae track "Demloot" (they loot) which immediately went viral.

Zimbabwe's chief epidemiologist Portia Manangazira was recently arrested for allegedly recruiting 28 relatives, including her father, as community health workers in a nearly \$800,000 virus awareness programme funded by the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC).

The training exercise, earmarked for 800 community health workers, saw her family draw a monthly \$600 stipend for three months, prosecutors said.

The anti-corruption watchdog is probing around a dozen cases linked to the coronavirus programme.

"At least 10 cases are ... (linked to) corruption in the procurement of PPEs and other materials," said Zimbabwe Anti-Corruption Commission spokesman John Makamure.

The charges include criminal abuse of office by [public officials](#), fraud and theft, said Makamure, refusing to divulge details.

Transparency International Zimbabwe told AFP it had received 1,400 complaints related to corruption in healthcare, policing and pandemic humanitarian relief in 2020.

Health care workers complain about inadequate protective gear, blaming corruption for the scarcity.

"The situation is dire," said nurses union leader Simbarashe Tafirenyika.

According to official tallies, the virus has killed at least 1,500 out of the nearly 37,000 diagnosed cases - figures experts say is understatement.

The peak of the second wave earlier this year exposed the dire state of

public hospitals that were already collapsing as a result of a two-decade-long economic crisis and uncontrolled inflation.

State hospitals were saturated in January and [private hospitals](#) had under fire for capitalising on this and charging desperate families exorbitant fees - as much as US\$2,500 per week for use of a ventilator.

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