

# Alarm grows in Africa as it watches India's COVID-19 crisis

April 30 2021, by Cara Anna

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In this Jan. 11, 2021 file photo a patient wearing an oxygen mask is treated in a makeshift emergency unit at Steve Biko Academic Hospital in Pretoria, South Africa, Monday, Jan. 11, 2021. Africa is "watching with total disbelief" as India struggles with a devastating resurgence in COVID-19 cases, the continent's top public health official said Thursday April 29, 2021, as African officials worry about delays in vaccine deliveries caused by India's crisis. (AP Photo/Themba Hadebe/File)

Africa is "watching with total disbelief" as India struggles with a devastating resurgence in COVID-19 cases, the continent's top public health official said Thursday, as African officials worry about delays in vaccine deliveries caused by India's crisis.

The African continent, with roughly the same population as India and fragile health systems, "must be very, very prepared" since a similar scenario could happen here, John Nkengasong, director of the Africa Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, told reporters.

"What is happening in India cannot be ignored by our continent," he said, and urged African countries to avoid mass gatherings including political rallies. "We do not have enough health care workers, we do not have enough oxygen," he warned.

Africa's [vaccine supply](#) heavily relies on India, whose Serum Institute is the source of the AstraZeneca vaccines distributed by the global COVAX project to get doses to low- and [middle-income countries](#). India's export ban on vaccines "has severely impacted the predictability of the rollout of vaccination programs and will continue to do so for the coming weeks and perhaps months," Nkengasong said.

"We are living in a world that is extremely uncertain now," he added.

Just 17 million [vaccine doses](#) have been administered across the African continent for a population of some 1.3 billion, according to the Africa CDC.



In this Jan. 11, 2021 file photo a health worker in a protective suit runs past oxygen cylinders in a makeshift emergency unit at Steve Biko Academic Hospital in Pretoria, South Africa, Africa is "watching with total disbelief" as India struggles with a devastating resurgence in COVID-19 cases, the continent's top public health official said Thursday, April 29, 2021, as African officials worry about delays in vaccine deliveries caused by India's crisis. (AP Photo/Themba Hadebe/File)

The situation in India is "very sad to observe," the World Health Organization's Africa chief told reporters in a separate briefing. "We are very concerned about the delays that are coming in the availability of vaccines," Matshidiso Moeti added.

Her WHO colleague, Phionah Atuhebwe, called the delay "quite

devastating for everybody" and said most African nations that received their first [vaccine](#) doses via COVAX will reach a "gap" in supply while waiting for second doses as early as May or June.

"We call upon countries that have extra doses to do their part," Atuhebwe said, adding that the WHO is reviewing the Chinese-made Sinopharm and Sinovac vaccines this week.

One unexpected COVID-19 vaccine donor is Congo, which Nkengasong said wants to give back some 1.3 million doses so they can be distributed to other African nations since it hasn't been able to do it at home.



In this Jan. 30, 2021 file photo a health worker takes oxygen cylinders to COVID-19 wards at Queen Elizabeth Central Hospital in Blantyre, Malawi. Africa is "watching with total disbelief" as India struggles with a devastating

resurgence in COVID-19 cases, the continent's top public health official said Thursday, April 29, 2021, as African officials worry about delays in vaccine deliveries caused by India's crisis. (AP Photo/Thoko Chikondi/File)

There is "a lot of vaccine hesitancy" in the vast country, Nkengasong said. He didn't immediately know how many people have received the doses there.

There is a five-week timeline to get the doses administered elsewhere, he said, and Congo is working with COVAX to hand them over. He expressed hope that the doses can reach other people quickly during what he called "an extremely critical time."

Nkengasong didn't know of other African countries saying they're unable to use their doses but he urged them not to wait until the last moment to hand them back. Other countries in Europe, North America and Asia "can have their luxury" of vaccine options, he said, but "we do not have choices."

Moeti with the WHO commended Congo for its decision, calling it "extremely wise of the government to make this estimation" in a country with gaps in its health care system.



In this Feb. 23, 2021 file photo a health worker administers a dose of China's Sinopharm vaccine to a man during the start of the vaccination campaign against COVID-19 at the Health Ministry in Dakar, Senegal. Africa is "watching with total disbelief" as India struggles with a devastating resurgence in COVID-19 cases, the continent's top public health official said Thursday, April 29, 2021, as African officials worry about delays in vaccine deliveries caused by India's crisis. (AP Photo/Leo Correa/File)



In this March 15, 2021 file photo boxes of AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine manufactured by the Serum Institute of India and provided through the global COVAX initiative arrive at the airport in Mogadishu, Somalia. Africa is "watching with total disbelief" as India struggles with a devastating resurgence in COVID-19 cases, the continent's top public health official said Thursday, April 29, 2021, as African officials worry about delays in vaccine deliveries caused by India's crisis. (AP Photo/Farah Abdi Warsameh/File)



In this March 24, 2021 file photo a frontline worker reacts as she receives a shot of the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine, manufactured by the Serum Institute of India and provided through the global COVAX initiative, in Machakos, Kenya. Africa is "watching with total disbelief" as India struggles with a devastating resurgence in COVID-19 cases, the continent's top public health official said Thursday, April 29, 2021, as African officials worry about delays in vaccine deliveries caused by India's crisis. (AP Photo/Brian Inganga/File)





In this Monday, March 29, 2021 file photo, a man prepares for his AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine at Ndirande Health Centre in Blantyre, Malawi. Africa is "watching with total disbelief" as India struggles with a devastating resurgence in COVID-19 cases, the continent's top public health official said Thursday, April 29, 2021, as African officials worry about delays in vaccine deliveries caused by India's crisis. (AP Photo/Thoko Chikondi, File)



In this March 29, 2021 file photo, numbers are handed out to people who wait to receive the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine at Ndirande Health Centre in Blantyre Malawi. Africa is "watching with total disbelief" as India struggles with a devastating resurgence in COVID-19 cases, the continent's top public health official said Thursday, April 29, 2021, as African officials worry about delays in vaccine deliveries caused by India's crisis. (AP Photo/Thoko Chikondi, File)

She also warned that African countries must step up key public health measures to help avoid India's scenario occurring here. The rate of testing for the coronavirus has dropped in "quite a few countries," she said, and mentioned seeing data from one African nation in which the proportion of people not wearing face masks has risen to almost 80%.

Only 43 million tests for the virus have been conducted across the African continent since the pandemic began, the Africa CDC chief said,

with a 26% drop in new tests conducted in the past week.

Nkengasong warned against travel bans, however, after Kenya this week announced it will suspend all passenger flights to and from India for two weeks starting midnight Saturday, while cargo flights continue.

"It's really unfortunate we are reacting in a very ad hoc manner in respect to flight movements," he said, emphasizing the strength of authentic negative PCR tests. "It's not people who are a threat, it's the virus."

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