

'Brutal' third wave hits Africa as vaccination slows

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Africa is facing a vicious coronavirus resurgence, with unprecedented hospital admissions and fatalities pushing health facilities to the brink as the continent falls far behind in the global vaccination drive.

With just under 5.3 million reported cases and around 139,000 deaths among its nearly 1.3 billion people, Africa is still the world's least-affected continent after Oceania, according to an AFP tally.

So far African nations have been spared disasters comparable to Brazil or India.

But the pandemic is resurging at an alarming rate in at least 12 countries, with continental cases expected to hit a record peak in around three weeks.

"The third wave is picking up speed, spreading faster, hitting harder," World Health Organization Africa director Matshidiso Moeti warned Thursday. "The latest surge threatens to be Africa's worst yet".

Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC) director John Nkengasong on Thursday described the third wave as "extremely brutal" and "very devastating".

And Liberia's President George Weah has warned the wave is "far more alarming than a year ago" as hospitals overflow in his country.

Compounding Africa's third wave are immunisation hitches, the spread of more transmissible virus variants and winter temperatures in the Southern Hemisphere.

The Delta variant, first detected in India, has so far been reported in 14 African countries, making up the bulk of new cases in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Uganda, according to the WHO.

Doctors in South Africa, which accounts for more than 35 percent of all cases recorded on the continent, are struggling with an unprecedented influx of patients.

Unlike past waves, this time "the hospital system is not coping," said doctors' association chief Angelique Coetzee.

South Africa's average new daily infections have increased 15-fold since early April, with hospital admissions rising around 60 percent.

'Unprecedented' deaths in Zambia

Namibia and Zambia are also seeing steep infection curves.

Zambia's health ministry has reported an "unprecedented" number of COVID-19 deaths piling pressure on mortuaries while Africa CDC said the country was "overwhelmed".

With similar trends in Uganda, Health Minister Jane Ruth Acheng blamed highly infectious variants for the new spread, "different from the second wave" with a large number of young people hospitalised.

Uganda is one of the countries facing reported oxygen shortages, although Acheng denied civil society groups' claim that the shortfall amounts to 24.5 million litres per day.

Governments are again tightening restrictions, including a new nationwide lockdown in Uganda and a tougher curfew in 13 Kenyan counties.

At the same time the pace of vaccinations is struggling to get off the ground.

According to the WHO, about one percent of the continent's population is fully vaccinated—the lowest ratio globally—and 90 percent of African nations will miss a target to inoculate a tenth of their populations by September.

"We are running a race behind time, the pandemic is ahead of us. We are not winning in Africa this battle against the virus," said Africa CDC's Nkengasong.

"It's frightening what is going on on the continent," he added.

A recent pledge by Western leaders to donate one billion [vaccine doses](#) to poorer countries has been widely criticised for being too slow.

Cases are "outpacing vaccinations", Moeti said. "Africa urgently needs a million more vaccines. We need a sprint".

'Waiting to die'

Several countries have failed to administer jabs from the UN-backed Covax scheme before their use-by date because of logistical failures and vaccine hesitancy.

Malawi destroyed almost 20,000 expired AstraZeneca doses in May, while the DRC and South Sudan have returned more than two million shots to the UN to avoid a similar scenario.

Authorities in Congo-Brazzaville are concerned over the slow take-up of almost 100,000 Chinese-made vaccines expiring in July.

A surge in coronavirus cases in India, the world's main AstraZeneca supplier, has delayed Covax deliveries to Africa.

Malawi exhausted its stocks last week, just as thousands were due for their second shot.

And hundreds of frustrated Zimbabweans protested last month after Harare's main vaccination centre ran out of jabs.

South Africa says it has secured enough Johnson & Johnson and Pfizer/BioNTech vaccines to immunise 67 percent of its 59 million inhabitants.

But the rollout has been hit by setbacks and only 2.2 million people—healthcare workers and over 60s—have received a jab so far.

"The lack of vaccines in a region with high levels of poverty and inequality means many people feel they are just waiting to die," said Amnesty International's regional director Deprose Muchena.

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