

Africa COVID deaths surge 43% in a week: WHO

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Coronavirus-linked deaths in Africa surged by 43 percent in the space of a week, driven by a lack of intensive-care beds and oxygen, the World Health Organization (WHO) said on Thursday.

Fatalities associated with COVID in the WHO's Africa region, which includes North Africa, rose to 6,273 in the week of July 5-11, compared with 4,384 in the previous week.

The agency's regional director, Matshidiso Moeti, told a virtual press conference that the rise was "a clear warning sign that hospitals in the most affected countries are reaching breaking point".

It was crucial for countries to beef up oxygen production to help patients suffering from the disease's worst symptoms, she said, speaking from the Congo capital of Brazzaville.

The WHO said the rise in deaths paralleled a chronic shortage of vaccines, a spread in the more contagious Delta variant, which was now being detected in 21 African countries, along with public fatigue over prevention measures.

Africa has officially recorded over six million cases of COVID-19, a figure that is far lower than on other continents but one that experts say is likely to be a big underestimate.

Funding appeal

Separately, after talks with the World Bank on Thursday, African leaders appealed for "at least \$100 billion" in commitments of financial support by year's end to help their countries "recover better" from the pandemic.

"There's still a lot to be done to overcome this crisis," said Ivory Coast President Alassane Ouattara, who opened the meeting in Abidjan.

"Less than three percent of Africa's total population has received a first dose of vaccine, compared to around 54 percent in the United States and European Union."

Moussa Faki Mahamat, chairman of the Africa Union Commission, called for help to restructure the debt of struggling African countries, which faced "pressing needs for immediate liquidity to buy vaccines and set down the foundations of economic recovery".

He said the pandemic had caused joblessness in Africa to rise by between 25 and 30 million people, while 40 million had fallen back into extreme poverty.

The meeting was called to discuss World Bank aid for African countries over the next three years.

The aid is administered via the bank's International Development Association (IDA), which renews the programme every three years.

The talks have been brought forward by a year to help poor countries cope with the impact of the pandemic.

Over the last three years, the IDA has allotted \$22 billion (19 billion euros) annually on average. Of the 76 beneficiary countries, 39 are in Africa.

In May, the international community promised at a meeting in Paris to help Africa fight the pandemic, but did not give a figure in monetary terms.

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