

Africa's confirmed cases of COVID-19 approaching 5,000

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Confirmed cases of COVID-19 on the African continent rose to 4,605 Sunday, with around 100 people having lost their lives to the virus. The need for an internationally coordinated response to stop the spread of the coronavirus on the African continent is urgent.

South Africa now has 1,280 confirmed cases and is emerging as the epicentre of the pandemic on the continent. But other countries are not lagging far behind—with Egypt (609), Algeria (511), Morocco (479) and Tunisia (312), each already recording hundreds of cases. South Africa reported its first two deaths last week from the novel coronavirus, but Algeria has recorded the most with 29.

Mami Mizutori, head of the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR), told Reuters that Africa is likely to see a higher mortality rate than the rest of the world as weak health care systems buckle under the surge of cases, saying, “It is easily imaginable that if this becomes the case in a country where the health system is not as sophisticated, then that could lead to possibly higher mortality.”

The World Health Organisation's regional director for Africa, Matshidiso Rebecca Moeti, warned of a “dramatic evolution” of the pandemic, telling France24, “The situation is very worrying, with a dramatic evolution: an increase geographically in the number of countries and also an increase in the number of infections.” He insisted that there must be “intensified action by African countries.”

African governments, with vicious and corrupt ruling elites at the helm and a long list of appalling human rights abuses and violations under their belt, are exploiting the spread of the coronavirus to build up the powers of the state in preparation for serious confrontations with the working class.

In contrast, little or nothing is being done to prepare

for the inevitable surge of cases by diverting resources and money toward the health care system and procuring lifesaving protective gear and medical equipment for health care workers and patients.

The African ruling elite, dependent on the major powers and transnational corporations for their privileged position, are far more concerned with how they can negotiate greater access to the wealth extracted from the international working class. This requires that they impose the dictates of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund on the working class and peasantry and ensure that minerals, oil and agricultural goods make their way to the advanced countries and manufacturing facilities unhindered. The logic of this is the violent suppression of any opposition to these dictates.

According to Bloomberg, two men were shot and killed in Rwanda by police for possibly involuntarily violating the stay-at-home order following the announcement by President Paul Kagame one week ago that the country would be on a 14-day lockdown enforced by the military and the police. Jean-Claude Nyiramana, 27, and Emmanuel Nyandwi, 25, were murdered in Nyanza District just outside Kigali on March 24.

In South Africa, ahead of the 21-day lockdown, President Cyril Ramaphosa delivered an address to the security forces in which he instructed them to be “a force for kindness.” In full military attire, in the manner of a dictator, the speech was designed to threaten and intimidate the population, with Ramaphosa declaring, “There are those who want to take chances who will want to challenge the might of the South African state ... Nudge them in the right direction and if they continue resisting, indicate to them that they are challenging the might of the State and the President.”

Defence Minister Nosiviwe Mapisa-Nqakula told the media, “I don’t think really people should be provocative because if you don’t want to comply with the regulation set out, honestly you are challenging and testing the state itself.”

The South African population views the presence of the military on the streets with a mixture of fear and trepidation. An in-depth report by *Times Live* covering the first day of lockdown met one resident who, after being asked by an armed soldier why he had run when he saw them approaching him, replied anxiously, “I’ve never seen you guys before. You scare me.”

In the Hillbrow neighbourhood of Johannesburg, South African police with batons attacked the homeless, before using tear gas and rubber bullets to disperse shoppers.

The African National Congress government has since extended the lockdown—announcing that the quarantine would continue until June, at a cost of 641 million Rand (US\$38 million) to the taxpayer, to be paid for by further attacks on the conditions of the working class.

Zimbabwe’s ZANU-PF government is imposing a 21-day lockdown from today. Zimbabwe has 7 confirmed cases and one death so far.

World Health Organisation Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, warning against the use of lockdowns as the only measure to confront pandemic, said, “To slow the spread of COVID-19, many countries introduced ‘lockdown’ measures. But on their own, these measures will not extinguish epidemics.” The WHO has stressed that it is critical that governments “test, test, test” for the virus and then isolate and treat those who are found positive for COVID-19.

The necessary measures to fight COVID-19 are the full-funding of health care, the provision of all the necessary medical equipment and protective gear for health care workers, and universal testing—demands running counter to the policies pursued for decades by every national ruling class who have refused to adequately finance health care.

Africa has some of the most unequal countries on the planet. According to Oxfam, “Five of Nigeria’s richest men have a combined wealth of US\$29.9 billion—more than the country’s entire national budget for 2017, with about 60 percent of its citizens [living] on less than US\$1.25 a day, the threshold for absolute poverty.”

Oxfam writes, “West African countries lose an estimated \$9.6 billion each year through corporate tax incentives offered to multinational companies. This would be enough to build about 100 modern and well-equipped hospitals each year in the region.”

Nurses and doctors have struck in Zimbabwe to demand personal protective equipment (PPE) and demand that wages be paid in dollars, which has prompted the Mnangagwa government to change the currency to dollars. In Kenya, nurses and doctors are threatening to strike if they are not provided with PPE in preparation for the surge of coronavirus cases. In Nigeria, doctors have gone on strike to demand safe and sanitary conditions.

This growing movement of the working class, in Africa and internationally, is showing the way out of the crisis that capitalism has inflicted on humanity. The wealth of the ruling elite must be expropriated and used to meet the demands of society, including the urgent procurement of protective gear and medical equipment. For this to be done, however, a socialist leadership in the working class must be built to wage an intransigent struggle against the banks, corporations and world imperialism and their agents on the continent.



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