

Confirmed coronavirus cases in Africa exceeds 6,000 with more than 200 deaths

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The number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 on the African continent as of Wednesday was 6,261 with over 200 fatalities.

The potential for an explosive growth of the pandemic is already clear, due to the prevalence of slums and overcrowded working class areas housing the most vulnerable in every country.

World Health Organisation Secretary General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus has pleaded, “Don’t abandon the poorest to coronavirus.” Africa should “wake up,” he declared. As far as the fate of the African working class goes, his appeal will fall on deaf ears of the continent’s ruling elite and the imperialist powers.

Alexandra township in Johannesburg—with some 20,000 “informal dwellings”—and Cape Town’s Khayelitsha township, the second largest township in South Africa, have already confirmed cases.

In Khayelitsha, a 25-year-old woman tested positive and is in isolation with her three-year-old daughter. She was in contact with members of her family and a childminder. According to *Times Live*, the young woman was left to potentially infect others, while local authorities and the African National Congress government squabbled over who should take responsibility for her.

Following reports in Rwanda that two young men had been murdered by the police for violating the lockdown, the South African media reported that a man in Volsoorus, outside Johannesburg, had been shot and killed by metropolitan police.

According to *Times Live*, following a confrontation with a group of people, the police “discharged rubber bullets.” It is alleged that the deceased, Sibusiso Amos, 40, “was followed up to his veranda where he was fatally shot.”

After the release of the officer who shot Amos, Independent Police Investigative Directorate (IPID) spokesperson, Sontaga Seisa, tried to placate public anger, telling the press, “He [the officer] is out now but that does

not mean he is off the hook. I want to emphasise that being out does not mean he is not involved in this murder and other charges.”

The police have been charged with two further counts of murder in relation to the lockdown and are being investigated by the IPID.

The South African military is also being investigated after videos surfaced showing soldiers’ degrading treatment of people who allegedly violated the lockdown—with some forced to do push ups, sits ups and other exercises. The *Financial Times* reports more such abuses, “including footage of a balaclava-clad soldier who was seen kicking and beating civilians caught outside in the lockdown.”

Nigeria’s lockdown, which began on Monday, is set to put 30 million people under quarantine in Abuja, Lagos and Ogun. The Nigerian military and the police are enforcing the lockdown.

In Kenya, Amnesty International and 19 other human rights groups in a joint statement noted that they “continue to receive testimonies from victims, eyewitnesses and video footage showing police gleefully assaulting members of the public in other parts of the country. Police indiscriminately threw tear gas, frog marched and beat up members of the public trying to get home in time for the curfew.”

The statement continues, “We have testimonies from suppliers and trained medical practitioners who experienced intimidation and threats of arrest as they tried to provide services during the lockdown.”

Riven by social inequality, with ruling elites who will stop at nothing to protect their wealth, African governments are exploiting the lockdown to impose de facto martial law and abrogate democratic rights as they prepare for serious opposition from the working class.

Even as the national bourgeoisie clamour for aid and “bailout packages” and coronabonds from the World

Bank and International Monetary Fund, they remain subordinate economically and politically to the major powers. Global markets have rendered their policies of import substitution largely ineffective. The ruling elites are bitterly hostile to an independent movement of the working class which would challenge their rule.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union brought with it a resurgence of neo-colonialism, culminating in a new scramble for Africa—as US imperialism tries to offset the growing economic influence of Chinese capitalism on the continent, while the old colonial European powers try to maintain a foot hold.

The *Financial Times* reported that Ken Ofori-Atta, chairman of the joint World Bank-IMF Development Committee, had “co-chaired a meeting in which African finance ministers called for a \$100bn stimulus package.” It noted that “the IMF said it was making \$50bn available for emerging countries, with \$10bn for low-income countries.”

However, the struggle for control of vital mineral and oil reserves, spheres of influence and other raw materials and markets means all aid or debt relief is tied to demands for free access to local markets by multinational corporations. The bulk of the debt will then be re-imposed on the backs of the poor, as ever deeper attacks are made on the working population to pay back the corporations, banks and financial institutions, like the IMF and World Bank.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) recently warned that half of all jobs could be lost on the African continent because of the pandemic—when 60 percent of the population remains unemployed and job insecurity soars.

Achim Steiner, administrator of the UNDP, said, “Without support from the international community, we risk a massive reversal of gains made over the last two decades, and an entire generation lost, if not in lives then in rights, opportunities, and dignity.”

This comes as the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) warns that Africa is two to three weeks away from being overwhelmed by the coronavirus storm.

“Africa accounts for 1% of global health expenditure” yet “it carries 23% of the disease burden, including hundreds of thousands of deaths each year from malaria, HIV/Aids and tuberculosis,” UNECA Executive Secretary Vera Songwe told *Bloomberg*. “Our hospital systems are so weak and so stressed already that another stress on them is going to break them.”

She warned, “If there is one African country or one country anywhere in the world that still has the coronavirus, the whole world has it. We’ve seen the speed of contamination and how quickly it can re-spread.”

A study by Imperial College in London showed that if early action had been taken to slow the spread of the virus, 800,000 would die from the coronavirus in Africa. However, if it was delayed, this number would soar to 4 million.

Save the Children UK chief executive Kevin Watkins told *The Express*, “If we act now and act decisively, we can prevent and contain the pandemic threat facing the poorest countries... Delaying prevention and containment in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa will not only claim many lives in those regions, it will potentially fuel the pandemic in Europe, North America and other regions. Failure to act now will increase the numbers infected by coronavirus in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa by almost one billion.”

Oxfam International executive Jose Maria Vera said, “Without urgent, ambitious and historic action, we could easily see the biggest humanitarian crisis since World War Two... We can only beat this pandemic if we act in solidarity with every country and for every person. No one is safe until we are all safe.”

An internationally coordinated response to stop the spread of the virus on the African continent is urgent. Without measures to provide the necessary medical equipment and staff to halt the pandemic, the contagion will spread, killing millions and risks blowback on the entire world. Mark Lowcock, UN undersecretary-general for humanitarian affairs, told *Bloomberg*. “If we leave coronavirus to spread freely in these places,” the virus “will have the opportunity to circle back around the globe.”

Only by building a socialist leadership in the working class, pulling behind it the impoverished peasantry and in unity with workers in the imperialist centres, can the working class in Africa prepare the uncompromising struggle against the banks, corporations and world imperialism now required.



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