Pandemic spirals out of control in South Africa, India, Brazil

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The official tallies of daily confirmed coronavirus cases in South Africa, India and Brazil show the pandemic in each country is now spreading exponentially. The three countries have emerged as regional epicenters of the pandemic and they have collectively reported one fifth of the world's pandemic cases and a sixth of the world's deaths.

One feature all three countries share is that the number of daily new cases in each has steadily gone up since the coronavirus first emerged. Whatever containment measures that were put in place have collapsed and the pandemic is running rampant through their respective populations.

South Africa continues to have the most coronavirus cases of any African country, with more than 177,000 total cases and just under 3,000 deaths. Both of these figures have more than doubled in the past three weeks.

The explosion of cases and deaths has put a massive strain on the country's health care system. The pandemic has forced medical centers such as Cape Town's Khayelitsha District Hospital to turn themselves entirely into COVID-19 wards. The head of internal medicine at the hospital, Dr. Ayanda Trevor Mnguni, has been forced to hire outside help to cope with the number of cases.

Dr. Mnguni has also had to hire extra staff on the spot because of a sharp spike in the number of nurses and doctors contracting the virus. In comments to the BBC, he noted, "We've got a lot of staff who are infected. We've had a week where we lost our porters. The following week it was our radiographer. A week after that … our staff from the laboratory."

He continued, "The majority of our nurses are themselves patients who've got diabetes and hypertension, so that puts a huge strain on the system. Also, we're noticing an explosion of undiagnosed diabetics, who are now being diagnosed as a result of COVID. And that obviously overwhelms our emergency unit."

Doctors at Khayelitsha are also at times forced to send overflow patients to a sports hall turned emergency coronavirus center run by Médecins Sans Frontières, an organization which has traditionally aided in the fight against HIV/AIDS. In scenes reminiscent of Wuhan, China, in January, a critical lack of supplies, especially oxygen, has meant that the most severe cases are often left to die in favor of those who are predicted to have a better chance of survival.

Similar conditions exist elsewhere in Africa. Egypt trails far behind South Africa in number of cases, standing at 72,700, but exceeds it in deaths, which have risen above 3,200. Egypt itself has seen a relative stabilization of the number of its new daily cases, which currently hover at 1,500. This number is expected to sharply rise now that the country has been reopened for tourism, including the Great Pyramid of Giza.

The number of coronavirus cases in India and South Asia more broadly is significantly higher. India alone has nearly 650,000 confirmed cases and more than 18,600 known deaths. While the country has seen a steady rise in new cases, it also saw a very sharp rise in new deaths, which have doubled in the past three weeks. The spike in deaths is in part the result of revised death tallies submitted from Mumbai and New Delhi, and more are expected as other cities and provinces submit their own death count updates.

The revisions were part of an ongoing effort to accurately count the number of dead, an issue that countries in the developing world as well as the advanced economies have faced. The *Financial Times* has issued repeated reports that the United Kingdom is

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missing at least half of coronavirus-related deaths from its official tally. Similar studies have been done in the US showing that the number of deaths should be increased by at least 25 percent. Estimates from epidemiologists in India suggest that the true number of dead in the country is double the current estimates.

One of the ways researchers in India have attempted to compare real and reported deaths is by investigating cemeteries and crematoriums. In New Delhi, both report that they have become overwhelmed with bodies in recent months.

Pakistan and Bangladesh are facing similar problems, including rising case numbers and death tolls. Pakistan currently has nearly 222,000 reported cases and 4,500 deaths, while Bangladesh has 156,000 cases and 1,900 deaths. Like India, however, there are concerns in both countries that the real casualties are undercounted as coronavirus deaths are mislabeled while cases skyrocket. South Asia as a whole has surged past one million cases and 25,000 known deaths.

Brazil, one of the most devastated countries in the world, is second only to the United States in COVID-19 cases and deaths. Every day it now reports an average of more than 35,000 cases and just under 1,000 deaths. The country has to date reported 1.5 million cases and 62,300 deaths.

As in India, local medical authorities suspect that the actual number of cases in Brazil is much higher than official tallies. The country currently ranks 111th in the world in per capita testing. While it has currently done nearly 3.3 million tests, 47 percent have tested positive. Models of the virus's spread suggest that the number of actual cases in the country may be up to twenty times the official figures.

This has not stopped the economic reopening ordered by President Jair Bolsonaro. Rio de Janeiro, a municipality with a population of 6.7 million, opened restaurants, bars and gyms yesterday. This follows reopening a month ago of car dealerships, home decoration stores, shopping malls and certain public spaces. Since then, the region's infection rate has increased by 50 percent and its death toll has increased by 70 percent.

Brazil's native population is among the most vulnerable and has also been heavily impacted. The Xavante territory, which has a population of 22,000 indigenous people, has suffered 16 coronavirus deaths so far. One of the main reasons is that local authorities underestimated the pandemic's ability to reach the more remote parts of the Amazon and as such did not make plans to send medical personnel to those regions if the virus did emerge.

Another indigenous community, this time in Alto Solimoes, has so far recorded 25 COVID-19 deaths, according to Brazil's Special Indigenous Health Service. There have been at least 380 deaths and 9,414 infections among the country's native population.

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