

South Africa sees surge in COVID-19 as restrictions lifted

Stephan McCoy
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The lifting of the lockdown and social distancing measures has caused a surge of coronavirus infections in South Africa.

The total number of cases is now approaching 210,000 and the number of deaths is over 3,300. This makes South Africa the country with the second highest number of deaths, behind Egypt, and the largest number of cases on the continent.

The numbers are expected to peak in July and August, particularly in Gauteng, the country's industrial hub—where the sharp increases in cases could overwhelm the province's health system—as well as the Western Cape and Eastern Cape provinces. Health experts have warned that deaths from COVID-19 could reach from 40,000 to more than 70,000 deaths before the end of the year.

The surge follows the government's reopening of the economy in May, as South Africa's economy teeters on the brink. The pandemic has worsened the already high rate of unemployment and drastically increased hunger.

Shabir Madhi, professor of vaccinology at Johannesburg's University of the Witwatersrand, speaking of the devastating impact of these numbers, said, "We're seeing a spike in infections in Johannesburg [the country's largest city]. The number of people that we are diagnosing on a daily basis now is absolutely frightening."

He added, "Who we are finding positive now is an indication of who will be in hospital three weeks from now."

Despite the surge in cases, President Cyril Ramaphosa has said that the African National Congress (ANC) government does not intend to reinstate a nationwide lockdown to stop the spread of the virus. Ramaphosa told Business Insider, "Another hard lockdown is not being considered for now, the issue of

jobs lost concerns us. Other countries are experiencing even bigger losses. We are developing various other ways of responding to this." By this, he means social distancing and mask wearing.

Bandile Masuku, the health minister in Gauteng province, which has the highest number of active cases and 44 percent of all the cases in the country, called for restrictions on the number of people at gatherings and on public transport, including taxis. But, he stressed, "We wouldn't want to return to hard lockdown because of the implications it has for the economy. What we are putting across is that we also have to get into it with proper insight because we've got experience with the previous lockdown."

Following the lifting of the lockdown, the Western Cape also saw a spike in infections, resulting in it becoming the epicentre of South Africa's epidemic. In the most poverty-stricken neighbourhoods in Cape Town, such as Khayelitsha and Klipfontein, the infection rates and possible mortality rates are starting to rival some of the worst-hit parts of the world.

Epidemiologist Professor Andrew Boulle, from the University of Cape Town's Centre for Infectious Disease Epidemiology and Research, said the Klipfontein health subdistrict, with a population of 3.6 million people and 6,316 confirmed cases, already had a mortality rate of about 700 per million people. In Khayelitsha it was 500 per million. He told Independent Online (IOL), "If the Western Cape was a country and was compared to other countries, at this point in time globally we might be one of the countries with the highest currently daily mortality rate per million population in the world." He warned that the pandemic had not yet peaked.

The government is spearheading its back-to-work campaign with the reopening of schools. Forced to

delay its original plans to reopen fully in June due to teachers' opposition, the government has said that schools will be fully open by August. In Gauteng province, at least 589 schools recorded positive cases of the coronavirus before the "second-phase" of the reopening began and 71 have had to close. In KwaBhaca in the Eastern Cape, 200 students tested positive at Makaula Senior Secondary School.

The reopening is happening even as hospitals near collapse due to the growing number of cases. Siviwe Gwarube, a Democratic Alliance MP and Shadow Minister of Health, has called for the Eastern Cape be placed under administration as the local government could not "fulfil its constitutional obligations" in "providing adequate health care to all in the province."

ICU beds are filling up nationally. Times Select reports, "South Africa needs more than 7,000 additional critical beds, with a combination of oxygen, non-invasive ventilators and invasive ventilators."

In Netcare Linksfield Hospital in Eastern Johannesburg, 15 staff members tested positive for COVID-19 according to a nurse, who said many nurses were worried because deep cleaning had not taken place at the facility and, while they were in isolation, the hospital used agency nurses to run the ICU. Another nurse told News24, "They even suggested that, since we tested positive, if we don't see symptoms in the next seven days, then we are good to come back to work." This flies in the face of government recommendations. The nurse said the hospital's primary concern was money, not the pandemic and that nurses were calling for the hospital to allow affected colleagues to retest before returning to work after 14 days.

South Africa's economy—which was already in recession before the pandemic with an official unemployment rate of more than 30 percent—contracted by 2 percent in the first quarter of 2020 compared with the previous quarter due to a downturn in mining and manufacturing, two pillars of the economy, and a 20 percent reduction in capital investment.

GDP per capita has been declining since 2013. South Africa's debts were downgraded to junk bond status in March. Economy Minister Tito Mboweni is expecting a contraction of more than 7 percent for the year as a whole, the biggest downturn since the 1930s, and a budget deficit of nearly 16 percent of GDP, double

earlier estimates. He warned that the country was, like Argentina, on the path of bankruptcy. He pledged to close the budget deficit by 2024 and to find \$13.5 billion of spending cuts in the next two years that will slash public sector jobs and wages and increase taxes.

The government's attempts to impose the full burden of the mounting economic crisis on the working class is being met with rising opposition. There have been numerous strikes and walkouts by transport and health care workers over safety issues and the lack of personal protective equipment. In the Eastern Cape, municipal workers at Port Elizabeth protested outside a council meeting demanding permanent employment because, as outsourced workers, they are being paid less than those on the city's payroll. The workers, who include meter guards, meter readers and seasonal workers, were met with stun grenades from the police.

The ANC government's response is to abrogate democratic rights and turn to dictatorship, using the army to help police enforce restrictions, along with forces under the South African Military Health Service deployed as medical personnel. Ramaphosa has told parliament he is extending the deployment of 20,000 soldiers, a reduction from the 76,000 deployed in April, until September 30 to enforce coronavirus restrictions. "The army will work in cooperation with the police to maintain law and order, support other state departments, and control the country's border line to combat the disease," he said.



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