

Africa's COVID threat hits new level as Delta variant spreads

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A little more than 1 percent of the African population has been fully vaccinated against the disease, according to the WHO [File: Siphiwe Sibeko/Reuters]

Monrovia, July 2 (RHC)-- Driving past warehouses and overgrown walls, an ambulance pulls up at a side entrance of a former medical centre at a disused United Nations military base in Liberia's capital, Monrovia.

The site has been rehabilitated and spruced up to serve as the principal COVID-19 treatment unit in the country, which has seen infections surge by more than 300 percent in the past two weeks.

As the ambulance drops off a new patient, workers at another truck offload oxygen cylinders before taking away a pile of empty ones. “Since the beginning of June, we’ve had 21 deaths,” the unit’s clinical coordinator, general practitioner Dr Richard Doe, told Al Jazeera. “Just to put that into perspective, it’s more than we had from March to December last year,” he said.

“Our facilities here are struggling,” Doe warned, noting that ventilators are not being used due to a lack of human resources. “We need the public to help us in this fight against COVID. As long as the people out there do not practice those basic things – wearing masks, hand hygiene, social distancing, and getting vaccinated where available, it will be like a rat race we can’t keep up with.”

The government has responded to the surge by banning gatherings of more than 20 people and ordering the closure of bars and nightclubs from 9pm, with warnings of a possible lockdown to follow.

Liberia is just one of many countries across the African continent to experience rapidly increasing COVID-19 cases and hospitalisations – just as much of the world is witnessing a decline in infection rates as vaccination campaigns take effect.

More than a dozen countries have reported their worst figures since the start of the pandemic, with more than 650,000 new cases recorded on the continent between May 3, when the so-called third wave began, and June 27.

At a press briefing this week, the World Health Organization’s Africa director Dr Matshidiso Moeti warned that “the speed and scale of Africa’s third wave is like nothing we’ve seen before.” “COVID-19 cases are doubling every three weeks, compared to every four weeks at the start of the second wave. Almost 202,000 cases were reported in the past week and the continent is on the verge of exceeding its worst week ever in this pandemic,” she added.

Moeti said that, among the 14 African countries now in resurgence, 12 have detected coronavirus variants of concern, including nine with the highly contagious Delta variant. “With the rampant spread of more contagious variants, the threat to Africa rises to a whole new level.”

A recent situational report published by the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security stated that Africa “has exhibited a substantial increase in daily incidence since mid-May”, with daily case numbers rising threefold.

The report cites “weak adherence to public health measures, including an increase in social gatherings and movement” as contributing to the recent spike in infections.

“The COVID-19 situation in Africa is worrisome,” Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, director-general of the World Health Organization (WHO), tweeted last week. “Both the number of cases and deaths [between June 14-20] are almost 40 percent higher than in the week before.”

A week later, hospitalisations due to COVID-19 have increased by a further 42 percent.

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