

WHO says Africa faces rising threat of a COVID third wave

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Geneva, June 4 (RHC)-- Healthcare systems across Africa are “far from ready” to cope with a fresh surge of coronavirus infections, with vaccine deliveries at a near standstill and cases surging in many countries, the World Health Organization (WHO) has warned.

“Many African hospitals and clinics are still far from ready to cope with a huge rise in critically ill patients,” WHO regional director for Africa, Matshidiso Moeti, said on Thursday. “The threat of a third wave in Africa is real and rising,” she added in a virtual briefing.

Africa has officially registered more than 4.8 million cases and 130,000 deaths, according to the WHO, representing 2.9 percent of global cases and 3.7 percent of deaths. According to a survey conducted by the WHO in May, the essential health facilities and personnel required to manage critically ill COVID-19 patients are grossly inadequate in many African countries.

Of 23 countries surveyed, most had less than one intensive care unit bed per 100,000 population and only one-third had mechanical ventilators. In comparison, countries like Germany and the United States have more than 25 beds per 100,000 people. "Treatment is the last line of defence against this virus and we cannot let it be breached," Moeti stressed, calling for better equipment for hospitals and medical staff.

In recent weeks, the continent has seen a rise in infections. South Africa, officially the most affected African country, has tightened health restrictions and now has more than 1.6 million cases and 56,439 deaths.

In the capital of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Kinshasa, the WHO detected an "exponential rise" last month in cases that mirrored a "clear deterioration" in the wider province. A DRC health ministry official confirmed "the third wave of COVID-19 is already there – it's the Indian [Delta] and South African [Beta] variants." "This wave could be deadlier than the previous ones," the official said, blaming lax adherence to social distancing and face masks.

Meanwhile in Uganda, the number of cases has jumped 131 percent in one week with outbreaks in schools and an increase in cases among health workers. Angola and Namibia are also seeing a resurgence.

Simultaneously, the continent is facing a shortage of vaccines and deliveries are almost at a standstill in Africa, according to WHO, which hopes for new deliveries in the coming months through the international COVAX scheme, including a pledge of 80 million doses from the United States.

Only 2 percent of Africans to date have received at least one shot, compared with 11 percent of the world's population, according to Our World in Data. Six countries have not kicked off inoculation, four of which are in Africa: Tanzania, Burundi, Chad and Eritrea.

Separately on Thursday, the head of the Africa Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC), John Nkengasong, slammed rich countries once again for failing to step up their effort in guaranteeing more equitable access to vaccines. "I would like to make a moral case to the leaders of the G7 that our limited supply of vaccines on the continent has definitely a serious boding for us, a serious economic boding for us," he said during a press briefing.

"Perhaps it is a greater moral boding for those who are sitting on excess doses of vaccines; because actually, they want to be on the right side of history."

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