Covid-19

A new wave of infections could be associated with more transmissible variants.

Africa can’t allow a “silent pandemic” to take place, said Professor Samba Sow, Director-General of the Centre for Vaccine Development in Mali. And for this, communication is key. “Let’s not hear again there’s no data from Africa—we have to generate data from Africa, for Africa.”

Sow urged African leaders to ensure tracing, testing and tracing; to place Africa at the forefront of vaccine research; and to not allow health systems to become overwhelmed to the detriment of other health issues, such as maternal mortality.

At least a dozen countries have so far confirmed presence of the variant first detected in India in late 2020. Experts believe the spread of new variants has contributed to an increase in both cases and deaths across the continent. But there is concern that new variants can’t easily be tracked because the testing required to identify them isn’t widely available.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) and the African Centres for Disease Control (CDC) launched a network of laboratories in 2020 to try to boost the continent’s capacity to identify these variants. It said the emergence of new, and more contagious variants “reinforced the need to step up genomic surveillance.” This involves analysing the code of the virus to understand its genetic makeup.

However, a recent article in UK medical journal The Lancet pointed out that while efforts were underway to expand this type of work, there were issues around funding, as well as shortages of reagents and staff with the skills required.

Uganda – ICC: The International Criminal Court (ICC) on May 6th sentenced Dominic Ongwen, a former child soldier turned Ugandan rebel commander, to 25 years in prison.

He was found guilty of a total of 61 crimes comprising crimes against humanity and war crimes, committed in northern Uganda between July 1st, 2002 and December 31st, 2005.

Judge Bertram Schmitt, President Judge, read a summary of the Chamber’s decision, saying “[The Chamber] is confronted with a perpetrator who wilfully and lucidly brought tremendous suffering upon his victims. However, it is also confronted with a perpetrator who himself had previously endured extreme suffering at the hands of the group of which he later became a prominent member and leader.”

The statement said the Chamber decided to give certain weight in mitigation to the circumstances of Ongwen’s childhood and his abdication by the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) at a very young age.

Social and Cultural

HEALTH

The new wave of infections in Africa is thought to be partly associated with the emergence of some variants that are more transmissible. Uganda was the first country on the continent to confirm the presence of the so-called Indian variant. It has now, along with Kenya, Morocco, Algeria, South Africa, Botswana, Angola, DR Congo, Nigeria, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

Over the past month, new cases across the continent declined by 9%, according to the CDC. BBC News online reported (21/5) New cases have been rising in countries such as South Africa, Egypt and Nigeria but dropping in DR Congo, Ethiopia and Kenya.

“The severe impact of Covid-19 in Africa is far more likely to die than in other parts of the world because of limited healthcare resources. Researchers, who looked at patients in hospitals across 10 African countries, found that nearly half of those who needed intensive care died, whereas the global average was less than a third.

Africa needs at least 20m doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine within six weeks if those who have had their first shot are to get the second in time,” AFP reported the WHO as saying on May 27th.

“Africa needs vaccines now,” said Dr Moeti, “any pause in our vaccination campaigns will lead to lost lives and lost hope.”

The WHO statement underlined the importance of respecting the recommended interval of eight to 12 weeks between doses to ensure a recipient’s prolonged 81% protection rate.

“In addition to this urgent need, another 200m doses of any WHO Emergency Use Listed Covid-19 vaccine are needed so that the continent can vaccinate 10% of its population by September 2021,” the statement added.

The first vaccines deliveries to 41 African countries under the Covax scheme began in March but nine countries have so far administered only a quarter of the doses received, while 15 countries have used less than half of their allocations. The vaccination rate in Africa is the world’s lowest. Globally an average of 150 vaccine doses per 1,000 people have been administered, but in sub-Saharan Africa it is hardly eight doses per 1,000, according to the WHO.

As of May 30th, confirmed cases of Covid-19 from 55 African countries reached 4,821,436, while over 23,109,877 vaccinations have been administered across the continent. Reported deaths in Africa reached 130,120 and 4,355,268 people have recovered. South Africa has the most reported – 1,659,070 – and 56,363 people died. Other most-affected countries are Morocco (518,868), Tunisia (343,374), Ethiopia (271,200), Egypt (260,659), Libya (185,181) and Kenya (170,485). (Sources as referenced in text)

Pandemic Feeds Conflict and Instability

Women and young people must be part of Africa’s plans to recover from the Covid-19 pandemic, which is feeding factors driving conflict on the continent, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres told the Security Council on May 19th. Ambassadors met virtually to examine how to address root causes of conflict while promoting post-pandemic recovery in Africa, a UN statement said.

Many communities and countries are already facing “a complex peace and security environment”, the UN chief said, and challenges such as long-standing inequalities, poverty, food insecurity and climate disruption, are raising risks of instability.

Some governments have restricted civic space, while hate speech, divisive rhetoric, and misinformation have risen along with case loads. “The severe impact of the pandemic on young people – especially in Africa, the youngest continent – is contributing to increased risks. Loss of
opportunities for education, employment and income drive a sense of alienation, marginalisation and mental health stress that can be exploited by criminals and extremists,” he warned.

Covid-19 is also deepening existing gender inequalities, and threatening hard-won gains made in women’s participation in all areas of social, economic and political life, including peace processes.

“I urge Member States to make proactive efforts to include women and young people when shaping post-pandemic recovery,” he said. (PANA 20/5) Vaccines will be made in Africa p.23143A

MEDIA

Africa: The 2021 World Press Freedom index compiled by Reporters sans Frontières (RSF) was published on May 3rd to mark World Press Freedom Day. In Africa, countries that made the first 50 are: Namibia (24th), Cabo Verde (27th), Ghana (30th), South Africa (32nd) and Burkina Faso (37th), Botswana (38th) and Senegal (49th).

RSF said: “Persistent pressures on journalists and media in North Africa keep three countries in the region (Algeria, Morocco and Libya) in the red and black zones of the press freedom map in 2021, for example where the situation is considered difficult or even very serious for the exercise of the profession – while citizens in the region have been constantly calling for more press freedom and freer access to information since the 2011 revolutions.”

In Libya, almost a decade after the February 17th 2011 revolution, the situation remains unstable, said RSF, stressing that the various political actors in the east and west are facing each other in an endless power struggle. It said the situation is aggravated by the intervention of armed militias that destabilise the political landscape and undermine the rule of law.

RSF said the organisation of presidential elections in December 2021 represents a hope for political transition, adding that “Libya needs framework laws guaranteeing freedom of expression, the safety of journalists and the right to reliable information”. (PANA 3/5)

French-Tunisian journalist founder of Jeune Afrique, Bechir Ben Ahmed, died on May 3rd of coronavirus in Paris at the age of 93 years. Considered as one of the pillars of the media in Africa, Ahmed was the correspondent of the newspaper Le Matin, before being appointed in 1954 as office director for Mahmoud Masmoudi, at that time senior minister in the Tunisian government of Taheb Ben Ammar. He then set up a first magazine, L’action, organ of the New Destourian party in 1955. In 1960, he set up the newspaper Africa action, then transformed it into Jeune Afrique, which became one of the most important specialised publications on African affairs. (PANA 3/5)

Cameroon: A journalist who has been held in Cameroon for ten months for “propagating false news” has started a hunger strike, a media trade union said on May 20th, according to Mbotsog Mbog Matip, director of the Climat Social daily, “is on hunger strike” in a prison in the capital Yaounde, said Alex Koko, head of the national journalists’ union Synajec.

RSF said another journalist, Paul Chouta, had been jailed for 23 months on May 18th, but as that sentence was equal to the time he had already spent in detention he was released on May 18th.

RSF and local press unions regularly denounce what they say are arbitrary detentions of journalists critical of President Paul Biya and his government. Cameroon sits a lowly 135th out of 180 nations in RSF’s press freedom index. (© AFP 20/5 2021)

In Republic of Congo, the editor of a satirical weekly critical of President Denis Sassou Nguesso was convicted on May 18th and ordered to serve six months. Raymond Malonga, 60, was also ordered to pay a fine of CFA francs 30m ($54,000), according to Tresor Nzila of the Congolese Human Rights Observatory (OCDH).

Malonga was arrested in early February while receiving treatment in hospital, Editor of Sel-Piment (Salt and Spice), Malonga was found guilty of libelling Georgette Okomba, the wife of a chore aide to Sassou Nguesso, after accusing her of diverting CFAf 1bn from state coffers. His online weekly, known for its critical of the government, was suspended early in 2021 by the High Council for Freedom of Communication – led by a former minister from Sassou Nguesso’s PCT party. (AFP 3/5 2021)

Ethiopia: Ethiopia has expelled a foreign correspondent working for The New York Times after earlier revoking his licence over “unbalanced” reporting, a government official confirmed on May 21st.

The decision to kick out Simon Marks was “the first time that a foreign journalist is expelled from the country” under Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, according to RSF.

Marks has filed a series of hard-hitting reports on the war in Tigray. His accreditation was cancelled shortly after he returned from a trip to Tigray in March.

Ethiopia’s government has imposed tough restrictions on journalists covering the conflict. A number of Ethiopian journalists and translators working for a range of international media organisations – including AFP, Reuters, the BBC and the Financial Times – have been detained while doing their jobs in recent months. Journalists and human rights groups have nonetheless uncovered growing evidence of atrocities committed by armed groups in the region, including Ethiopian soldiers and Eritrean troops fighting on the government’s behalf. The revelations have contributed to growing international diplomatic pressure on Abiy. (© AFP 21/5 2021)

Guinea: A court in Guinean capital Conakry fined well-known sports commentator and historian Amadou Diouloe Diallo the equivalent of $515 on May 19th for “insulting” President Alpha Conde, as he was freed after serving three months in jail. Diallo is one among hundreds of people arrested or tried in recent months over their opposition to Conde.

Diallo’s arrest in late February came after he claimed in a radio broadcast that Conde’s “only aim” was to “exterminate Guinea’s Fulani people” – an ethnic group believed to largely support the opposition. Such political affiliations along ethnic lines are a sore spot in Guinean politics, which is frequently a pretext for violence.

His lawyer Mohamed Traore said he was “pleased” his client was liberated, but added that “Amadou Diouloe Diallo shouldn’t have spent a single night in prison”. Such detentions had become “commonplace” in Guinea, Traore said.

“The Guinean authorities must stop detaining journalists arbitrarily,” RSF said. European Parliament members have also recently complained of “impunity” for rights violations in Guinea in a letter to the EU’s top diplomat Josep Borrell seen by AFP. Borrell expressed “concern” at the “critical” human rights situation there in his reply, also seen by AFP.

The Guinean government has insisted that it respects human rights and complained of critics “frontalontental approach”. (© AFP 19/5 2021)

Somalia: The National Union of Somali Journalists (NUSOJ) said in a new report that two journalists were killed, 33 others detained while 133 cases of intimidation were recorded in Somalia during 2020, privately-owned Radio Shabelle reported.

Released on World Press Freedom Day 2021, the report titled Between a Rock