

Brazzaville/ Cairo, 7 April 2020 – The number of confirmed COVID-19 cases in Africa has risen to more than 10 000 and caused more than 500 deaths. While the virus was slow to reach the continent compared to other parts of the world, infection has grown exponentially in recent weeks and continues to spread.

Reaching the continent through travellers returning from hotspots in Asia, Europe and the United States, Africa's first COVID-19 case was recorded in Egypt on 14 February. Since then a total of 52 countries have reported cases. Initially, mainly confined to capital cities, a significant number of countries in Africa are now reporting cases in multiple provinces "COVID-19 has the potential not only to cause thousands of deaths, but to also unleash economic and social devastation. Its spread beyond major cities means the opening of a new front in our fight against this virus," said Dr Matshidiso Moeti, World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Director for Africa. "This requires a decentralised response, which is tailored to the local context. Communities need to be empowered, and provincial and district levels of government need to ensure they have the resources and expertise to respond to outbreaks locally."

WHO is working with governments across Africa to scale up their capacities in critical response areas such as coordination, surveillance, testing, isolation, case management, contact tracing, infection prevention and control, risk communication and community engagement, and laboratory capacity. Ghana, Kenya, Ethiopia, Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia and Nigeria have expanded national testing to multiple laboratories, allowing for decentralized testing. These combined measures will ensure the rapid identification of cases, the tracking down and quarantining of contacts and the isolation and treatment of patients. It is also crucial that people are provided with accurate information which will promote healthy behaviours. Protection of health workers is a vital component of the response and when governments implement physical distancing measures, the basic needs of people should be taken into account.

"Africa still has an opportunity to reduce and slow down disease transmission. All countries must rapidly accelerate and scale up a comprehensive response to the pandemic, including an appropriate combination of proven public health and physical distancing measures. Within that process, Member States should target effective control of the outbreak, but plan for the worst," said Dr Ahmed Al-Mandhari, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean.

"Early isolation of all cases, including mild cases, is one of the key control measures, along with early detection, early treatment and contact tracing. Timely and accurate epidemiological data are one of the most important tools to inform and drive the response. We must protect our

health care workers and ensure that they are appropriately equipped – they are on the front lines and need our unwavering support. We owe them a great deal.”

There is concern about the impact of the pandemic on countries with fragile health systems and those experiencing complex emergencies. The international community should extend technical and financial support to these countries to enhance response capacities to minimize the spread of the outbreak. Some countries in Africa may not have adequate intensive care unit capacity such as beds, ventilators and trained personnel.

It is critical that countries do all they can to prevent this outbreak from intensifying further. This means a strong public health response by every arm of government and every part of society. WHO is working across Africa to deliver essential equipment, train health workers, clinicians and public servants on how best to respond to COVID-19, and to tailor global guidance to challenging local contexts. We are also working to address global market failures and ensure a reliable and equitable distribution of essential supplies and equipment to low- and middle-income countries, including those in Africa.

Note to editors

Within the WHO system, Africa is divided between two regional offices. The WHO Regional Office for Africa comprises 47 countries which include Algeria and most of sub-Saharan Africa. While the WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean includes an additional seven countries (Djibouti, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, Somalia, Sudan and Tunisia).

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Friday 19th of April 2024 06:45:03 PM