

Covid-19 deaths in Africa surge 43% week-on-week, WHO says

Africa recorded a 43% jump in Covid-19 deaths last week as infections and hospital admissions have risen and countries face shortages of oxygen and intensive-care beds, the World Health Organisation (WHO) said on Thursday.



Funeral workers wearing personal protective equipment carry a casket during the burial of a Covid-19 victim, amid a nationwide coronavirus disease (Covid-19) lockdown, at the Olifantsvlei cemetery, south-west of Joburg, South Africa 6 January, 2021. Reuters/Siphiwe Sibeko

The continent's case fatality rate - the proportion of deaths among confirmed cases - stands at 2.6% against the global average of 2.2%, WHO Africa said in its weekly briefing.

"Africa's third wave continues its destructive pathway, pushing past yet another grim milestone as the continent's case count tops six million," Matshidiso Moeti, WHO regional director for Africa, told the briefing.

The surge in infections, which is partly driven by the presence of the highly transmissible Delta variant of the coronavirus in 21 African countries, is leaving a "brutal cost in lives lost" in its trail, she said.

Public fatigue

Deaths have climbed steeply for the past five weeks to 6,273 last week, just a percentage point shy of its weekly peak recorded in January.

"This is a clear warning sign that hospitals in the most impacted countries are reaching a breaking point," Moeti said.

Namibia, South Africa, Tunisia, Uganda and Zambia accounted for the bulk of the fatalities, WHO said.

Public fatigue with restrictions to daily life aimed at curbing the spread of the virus was also to blame for the surge, WHO Africa said, which has seen the continent record an increase of one-million cases in the shortest time so far in the pandemic.

It took just a month for infections to increase by the latest one million, compared with the three months it took to rise to five million from four million, Moeti said.

Vaccine supply challenges

Monoclonal antibody therapies, which the WHO approved for treatment of Covid-19 patients last week, will be out of reach for many people in Africa due to their high price tag of about \$2,000 per patient, she said.

"We are advocating for generics to be produced rapidly to make these products more affordable," she said.

Africa was forced to pause its vaccine rollout due to supply challenges and only 53-million doses of Covid-19 vaccines have been administered so far, Moeti said, and only 18-million Africans are fully vaccinated. The continent's population is 1.3 billion.

"This clearly needs to urgently increase," she said, adding that deliveries from the United States, Europe and the global vaccine sharing Covaxscheme are expected to gather pace in the next few weeks.

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