

Coronavirus

Just 3% of COVID deaths

Experts 'mystified' as Africa avoids disaster

HARARE, Zimbabwe, Nov 21, (AP): At a busy market in a poor township outside Harare this week, Nyasha Ndou kept his mask in his pocket, as hundreds of other people, mostly unmasked, jostled to buy and sell fruit and vegetables displayed on wooden tables and plastic sheets. As in much of Zimbabwe, here the coronavirus is quickly being relegated to the past, as political rallies, concerts and home gatherings have returned.

"COVID-19 is gone, when did you last hear of anyone who has died of COVID-19?" Ndou said. "The mask is to protect my pocket," he said. "The police demand bribes so I lose money if I don't move around with a mask." Earlier this week, Zimbabwe recorded just 33 new COVID-19 cases and zero deaths, in line with a recent fall in the disease across the continent, where World Health Organization data show that infections have been dropping since July.

When the coronavirus first emerged last year, health officials feared the pandemic would sweep across Africa, killing millions. Although it's still unclear what COVID-19's ultimate toll will be, that catastrophic scenario has yet to materialize in Zimbabwe or much of the continent.

Scientists emphasize that obtaining accurate COVID-19 data, particularly in African countries with patchy surveillance, is extremely difficult, and

warn that declining coronavirus trends could easily be reversed.

But there is something "mysterious" going on in Africa that is puzzling scientists, said Wafaa El-Sadr, chair of global health at Columbia University. "Africa doesn't have the vaccines and the resources to fight COVID-19 that they have in Europe and the US, but somehow they seem to be doing better," she said.

Fewer than 6% of people in Africa are vaccinated. For months, the WHO has described Africa as "one of the least affected regions in the world" in its weekly pandemic reports.

Population

Some researchers say the continent's younger population — the average age is 20 versus about 43 in Western Europe — in addition to their lower rates of urbanization and tendency to spend time outdoors, may have spared it the more lethal effects of the virus so far. Several studies are probing whether there might be other explanations, including genetic reasons or past infection with parasitic diseases.

On Friday, researchers working in Uganda said they found COVID-19 patients with high rates of exposure to malaria were less likely to suffer severe disease or death than people with little history of the disease.

"We went into this project thinking we would see a higher rate of negative outcomes in people with a history of malaria infections because that's what was seen in patients co-infected with malaria and Ebola," said Jane Achan, a senior research advisor at the Malaria Consortium and a co-author of the study. "We were actually quite surprised to see the opposite — that malaria may have a protective effect."

Achan said this may suggest that past infection with malaria could "blunt" the tendency of people's immune systems to go into overdrive when they are infected with COVID-19. The research was presented Friday at a meeting of the American Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene.

Christian Happi, director of the African Center of Excellence for Genomics of Infectious Diseases at Redeemer's University in Nigeria, said authorities are used to curbing outbreaks even without vaccines and credited the extensive networks of community health workers.

"It's not always about how much money you have or how sophisticated your hospitals are," he said.

Devi Sridhar, chair of global public health at the University of Edinburgh, said African leaders haven't gotten the credit they deserve for acting quickly, citing Mali's decision to close its borders before COVID-19 even arrived.

"I think there's a different cultural approach in Africa, where these countries have approached COVID with a sense of humility because they've experienced things like Ebola, polio and malaria," Sridhar said.

In past months, the coronavirus has pummeled South Africa and is estimated to have killed more than 89,000 people there, by far the most deaths on the continent. But for now, African authorities, while acknowledging that there could be gaps, are not reporting huge numbers of unexpected fatalities that might be COVID-related. WHO data show that deaths in Africa make up just 3% of the global total. In comparison, deaths in the Americas and Europe account for 46% and 29%.

In Nigeria, Africa's most populous country, the government has recorded nearly 3,000 deaths so far among its 200 million population. The US records that many deaths every two or three days.

The low numbers have Nigerians like Opemipo Are, a 23-year-old in Abuja, feeling relieved. "They said there will be dead bodies on the streets and all that, but nothing like that happened," she said.

Immunity

On Friday, Nigerian authorities began a campaign to significantly expand the West African nation's coronavirus immunization. Officials are aiming to inoculate half the population before February, a target they think will help them achieve herd immunity.

Oyewale Tomori, a Nigerian virologist who sits on several WHO advisory groups, suggested Africa might not even need as many vaccines as the West. It's an idea that, while controversial, he says is being seriously discussed among African scientists — and is reminiscent of the proposal British officials made last March to let COVID-19 freely infect the population to build up immunity.

That doesn't mean, however, that vaccines aren't needed in Africa.

"We need to be vaccinating all out to prepare for the next wave," said Salim Abdool Karim, an epidemiologist at South Africa's University of KwaZulu-Natal, who previously advised the South African government on COVID-19. "Looking at what's happening in Europe, the likelihood of more cases spilling over here is very high."

The impact of the coronavirus has also been relatively muted beyond Africa in poor countries like Afghanistan, where experts predicted outbreaks amid ongoing conflict would prove disastrous.

Hashmat Arifi, a 23-year-old student in Kabul, said he hadn't seen anyone wearing a mask in months, including at a recent wedding he attended alongside hundreds of guests. In his university classes, more than 20 students routinely sit unmasked in close quarters.

"I haven't seen any cases of corona lately," Arifi said. So far, Afghanistan has recorded about 7,200 deaths among its 39 million people, although little testing was done amid the conflict and the actual numbers of cases and deaths are unknown.

Back in Zimbabwe, doctors were grateful for the respite from COVID-19 — but feared it was only temporary.

"People should remain very vigilant," warned Dr. Johannes Marisa, president of the Medical and Dental Private Practitioners of Zimbabwe Association. He fears that another coronavirus wave would hit Zimbabwe next month. "Complacency is what is going to destroy us because we may be caught unaware."



Happi



Dr. Oleksandr Molchanov stands in a corridor taking a short rest after performing CPR on a patient at a hospital in Kakhovka, Ukraine, on Friday, Oct. 29, 2021. Health care workers like Molchanov are being stretched to the limit because of a surge in coronavirus infections and deaths in Ukraine. (AP)

Coronavirus

Europe again global epicenter of COVID pandemic

EU pits vaccinated vs unvaccinated

BRUSSELS, Nov 21, (AP): This was supposed to be Christmas in Europe where family and friends could once again embrace holiday festivities and one another. Instead, the continent is the global epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic as cases soar to record levels in many countries.

With infections spiking again despite nearly two years of restrictions, the health crisis increasingly is pitting citizen against citizen — the vaccinated against the unvaccinated.

Governments desperate to shield overburdened healthcare systems are imposing rules that limit choices for the unvaccinated in the hope that doing so will drive up rates of vaccinations.

Austria on Friday went a step further, making vaccinations mandatory as of Feb. 1.

"For a long time, maybe too long, I and others thought that it must be possible to convince people in Austria, to convince them to get vaccinated voluntarily," Austrian Chancellor Alexander Schallenberg said.

He called the move "our only way to break out of this vicious cycle of viral waves and lockdown discussions for good."

While Austria so far stands alone in the European Union in making vaccinations mandatory, more and more governments are clamping down.

Starting Monday, Slovakia is banning people who haven't been vaccinated from all nonessential stores and shopping malls. They also will not be allowed to attend any public event or gathering and will be required to test twice a week just to go to work.

"A merry Christmas does not mean a Christmas without COVID-19," warned Prime Minister Eduard Heger. "For that to happen, Slovakia would need to have a completely different vaccination rate."

He called the measures "a lockdown for the unvaccinated."

Slovakia, where just 45.3% of the 5.5 million population is fully vaccinated, reported a record 8,342 new virus cases on Tuesday.

It is not only nations of central and eastern Europe that are suffering anew. Wealthy nations in the west also are being hit hard and imposing restrictions on their populations once again.

"It is really, absolutely, time to take action," German Chancellor Angela Merkel said. With a vaccination rate of 67.5%, her nation is now considering mandatory vaccinations for many health professionals.

"All of Germany is one big outbreak," Lothar Wieler, head of Germany's disease control agency, told reporters Friday. "This is a nationwide state of emergency. We need to pull the emergency brake."

Greece, too, is targeting the unvaccinated. Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis announced a battery of new restrictions late Thursday for the unvaccinated, keeping them out of venues including bars, restaurants, cinemas, theaters, museums and gyms, even if they have tested negative.

"It is an immediate act of protection and, of course, an indirect urge to be vaccinated," Mitsotakis said.

The restrictions enrage Clare Daly, an Irish EU legislator who is a member of the European parliament's civil liberties and justice committee. She

Ukraine's doctors pushed to the limit by COVID-19 wave

KAKHOVKA, Ukraine, Nov 21, (AP): As coronavirus infections hit Ukraine, a single shift for Dr. Oleksandr Molchanov now stretches to 42 hours — 24 of them in Kakhovka's hospital, followed by another 18 hours spent visiting tents set up to care for 120 COVID-19 patients.

While vaccination rates in Eastern Europe have generally lagged, Ukraine has one of the lowest in the region. But because of its underfunded and struggling health care system, the situation has turned dire nearly two years since the virus swept into Europe.

The country is setting records almost every day for infections and deaths, most recently on Tuesday, when 838 deaths were reported.

"We are extinguishing the fire again. We are working as at the front, but our strength and capabilities are limited," said Molchanov, who works at the hospital in the city in southern Ukraine on the Dnieper River. "We are working to the limit."

After his grueling shift, the 32-year-old doctor goes home to sleep and recover for two days. The next one may be even more challenging.

"The situation is only getting worse," Molchanov said. "Hospital beds are running out, there are

more and more serious patients, and there is a sore lack of doctors and medical personnel."

The tents beside Kakhovka's hospital have 120 beds, and 87 of them are occupied, with more patients arriving every day. But Molchanov is one of only three doctors to care for them.

President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's administration inherited a health care system that was undermined by reforms launched by his predecessor that closed many small-town hospitals.

In those communities, people have to seek care in large cities. If the problem is severe enough that a patient needs an ambulance, the wait can be as long as eight hours.

"They are bringing patients in extremely difficult condition, with a protracted form" of COVID-19, said Dr. Anatoly Galachenko, who also works at the tent hospital. "The main reason is the remoteness of settlements and the impossibility of providing assistance at the primary stages of the disease."

Yulia Tymoshenko, a former prime minister who leads the opposition Batkivshchyna party, said she has traveled to many hospitals in Ukraine and found shortages everywhere.

argues that nations are trampling individual rights.

"In a whole number of cases, member states are excluding people from their ability to go to work," Daly said, calling Austria's restrictions on the unvaccinated that preceded its decision Friday to impose a full lockdown "a frightening scenario."

Even in Ireland, where 75.9% of the population are fully vaccinated, she feels a backlash against holdouts.

"There's almost a sort of hate speech being whipped up against the unvaccinated," she said.

The world has had a history of mandatory vaccines in many nations for diseases such as smallpox and polio. Yet despite a global COVID-19 death toll exceeding 5 million, despite overwhelming medical evidence that vaccines highly protect against death or serious illness from COVID-19 and slow the pandemic's spread, opposition to vaccinations remains stubbornly strong among parts of the population.

Some 10,000 people, chanting "freedom, freedom," gathered in Prague this week to protest Czech government restrictions imposed on the unvaccinated.

Freedom

"No single individual freedom is absolute," countered Professor Paul De Grauwe of the London School of Economics. "The freedom not to be vaccinated needs to be limited to guarantee the freedom of others to enjoy good health," he wrote for the liberal think tank Liberale.

That principle is now turning friends



In this April 20, 2013 file photo, male greater sage grouse perform mating rituals for a female grouse, not pictured, on a lake outside Walden, Colo. The Biden administration is considering new measures to protect the ground-dwelling bird that was once found across much of the US West. It has lost vast areas of habitat in recent decades due to oil and gas drilling, grazing, wildfires and other pressures. (AP)

Discovery

New measures to protect grouse:

The Biden administration said it will consider new measures to protect greater sage grouse, a bird species once found across much of the US West that has suffered drastic declines in recent decades due to oil and gas drilling, grazing, wildfires and other pressures.

The announcement of a range-wide evaluation of habitat plans for greater sage grouse came after the Trump administration tried to scale back conservation efforts adopted when **Joe Biden** was vice president in 2015.

A federal court blocked Trump's changes. But Biden administration officials said the attempt set back conservation efforts — even as the chicken-sized bird's habitat was further ravaged by wildfires, invasive plants and continued development.

Disagreement over the region's sage grouse is longstanding and often bitter, and any new restrictions the administration adopts against energy or agriculture is sure to further inflame tensions. Republican-run states and industries that profit off public lands have clashed with wildlife advocates over how much space the birds need to survive.

Many environmentalists insisted that the 2015 conservation plans didn't go far enough because of loopholes that allowed grazing and drilling on land that sage grouse need. Opponents said they hobbled economic progress.

Biologists say wide buffers from drilling and other activities are needed to protect sage grouse breeding areas where birds engage in elaborate annual mating rituals.

Bureau of Land Management Deputy Director **Nada Culver** said "everything's on the table" as the agency launches its evaluation of sage grouse habitat, with no set deadlines for action.

"From changes to the buffers, to how we manage energy development, to how we manage every other activity...we are evaluating it and we are looking for input on what are the most important things to look at," Culver said. (AP)

'Return remains, artifacts': Seven tribes are asking an Alabama university to return the remains of nearly 6,000 people excavated over the years from what once was one of the largest Native American settlements in North America.

The Oklahoma-based Muscogee Nation, Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma and five other tribes have filed a petition under a federal law for the return of 5,982 "human remains of our ancestors" and funerary objects now held by the University of Alabama and its Moundville Archaeological Park.

"These are human beings. We consider them to be our grandparents," Raelynn Butler, the Muscogee Nation's historic and cultural preservation manager, said in an interview.

Butler said tribes are seeking the return so the remains can be reburied with the funerary objects. In a letter to tribal officials, James T. Dalton, Executive Vice President and Provost of the University of Alabama said that the university hopes to work with the tribes.

The Alabama site, simply known as Moundville because of the large earthen mounds constructed there, once housed what was believed to be a large and thriving settlement.

While its ancient name is unknown, the city was founded around 1120 and at its peak was one of the largest Native American settlements in North America, according to the university. The site included a great plaza and 26 earthen mounds. It later fell into decline, although it was used



Biden



Culver

as a ceremonial site and burial ground. It was largely abandoned by the 1500s. (AP)

The site and museum run by the University of Alabama is now a regular stop for elementary school students on field trips.

Tens of thousands of indigenous peoples, including the Muscogee Nation, were forcibly removed from their ancestral homelands by the US government between 1830 and 1850 during the devastating Trail of Tears. (AP)