



News Highlights



Thursday, 26 March 2020

Today's highlights:

- Coronavirus:** Coronavirus in Africa: 45 countries infected, 9 virus-free
- Nigeria:** 12 kidnapped victims regain freedom in Nigeria
- Mozambique:** Mozambique insurgents stage second major attack in three days
- Egypt:** Egypt's COVID-19 cases hit 456 with 21 deaths
- Libya:** Libya battles escalate as coronavirus arrives in country

The AU Situation Room

Conflict Prevention and Early Warning Division (CPEWD),
Peace and Security Department (PSD)
Tel. (251-11) 5526 373 Ext. 4150
Tel. Direct: (251-11) 5515 143
Fax: (251-11) 5519 321, 5514 227
P.O. Box: 3243, Addis Ababa
Email: situationroom@africa-union.org
Website: www.peaceau.org



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CORONAVIRUS



AFRICA

Coronavirus in Africa: 45 countries infected, 9 virus-free

There are now more than 1,400 confirmed cases of coronavirus across the continent, with a number of African countries imposing a range of prevention and containment measures against the spread of the pandemic.

According to the latest data, of the WHO on COVID-19 in Africa, the breakdown remains fluid as countries confirm cases as and when. The whole of Africa has rising cases with a sizeable number of countries holding out.

We shall keep updating this list which will be put in sub-continental blocs: East, West, Central, southern and North Africa.

The classifications are based on where the countries are located especially in the case of countries that belong to two different blocs, like Tanzania in East Africa, despite belonging to EAC and SADC. (AFRICA NEWS)



Coronavirus: Libya, Mali record first cases; South Africa spike continues

The coronavirus was confirmed in the Chinese city of Wuhan in late December 2019. Cases have since been confirmed in over scores of countries across the globe.

The World Health Organisation, WHO, has since declared it a pandemic. WHO chief Tedros Ghebreyesus said while China had a robust health system to detect and control, his outfit remained concerned about the virus entering country's with weak systems.

With about 34 African countries currently with recorded cases, governments continue to roll out increasingly robust measures to halt the spread and to contain the pandemic which has claimed a number of lives.

Coronaviruses are a family of viruses that range from the common cold to MERS coronavirus, which is Middle East Respiratory Syndrome coronavirus and SARS, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome coronavirus.

In this article, we will share the latest developments as authorities implement measures to contain the spread of the virus, especially on the African continent. There is a flurry of restrictions across Africa as governments take measures to deal with the outbreak. (AFRICA NEWS)



Africa's handful coronavirus-free nations: Lesotho, Sierra Leone, Burundi etc.

There are eight African countries that have not recorded a case of coronavirus as at midday GMT of Sunday March 25. 46 African countries have officially recorded cases. The death toll had passed 50 while recoveries were also rising.

The region with the highest virus-free countries being southern Africa while Central Africa had one country – Sao Tome and Principe.

The classifications are based on where the countries are located especially in the case of countries that belong to two different blocs, like Tanzania in East Africa, despite belonging to EAC and SADC.

Experts have stressed that it is only a matter of time before these countries likely detect cases even though much of the continent is closing borders to combat spread and improve containment of confirmed cases.

The eight virus-free group comprises the following:

1. Sao Tome and Principe
2. Comoros
3. Lesotho
4. South Sudan
5. Burundi
6. Sierra Leone
7. Malawi
8. Botswana

Africa Center for Disease Control shared a map of 43 infected countries before Libya and Mali confirmed cases. (AFRICA NEWS)



ERITREA

Eritrea's coronavirus cases hits four, all commercial flights banned

ASMARA, 25 March (AFRICA NEWS) - Three passengers who arrived in Asmara from Dubai with flight Air Arebi on Saturday 23 March at 5:00 a.m. LT, were diagnosed positive for COVID-19, today. All three passengers are Eritrean nationals resident in the country.

This puts the total number of infected individuals, to-date, to four. The passengers who were on the same flight with the patients and all those who came in physical contact with them have been quarantined.

All the patients are receiving necessary treatment at Villagio Hospital (Asmara) and remain in satisfactory condition.

In this connection, commercial passenger flights to and from Eritrea will not be allowed from midnight today, (25 March 2020). The ban will remain effective for two weeks until further review.

The Ministry of Health will continue to monitor developments and trends regarding COVID-19 and issue, as necessary, further information and guidelines. (AFRICA NEWS)



TANZANIA

Tanzania's number of confirmed COVID-19 case rises to 13

DAR ES SALAAM, 25 March (XINHUA) - Tanzania's Zanzibar health authorities on Wednesday confirmed the second case of COVID-19 in the archipelago, bringing the total confirmed cases to 13 in the country.

Hamad Rashid, Zanzibar's Minister for Health, told a news conference that the newly confirmed 29-year-old German female is wife of a Ghanaian national who tested positive for the disease last week.

"We have been monitoring the German female and when she was tested today (Wednesday) she was found positive," said Rashid, adding that the woman was transmitted with the virus by his Ghanaian husband.

Rashid said the couples have been self-isolated and were receiving treatment to ensure that they did not transmit the virus to other people in Zanzibar.

The minister added that one person suspected to have been infected by COVID-19 has been quarantined on Pemba Island and underwent test.

Rashid said 65 people have been quarantined for 14 days on the islands and they were being monitored by health authorities. (XINHUA)



CAPE VERDI

Cape Verde reports 4th COVID-19 confirmed case: official

PRAIA, 25 March (XINHUA) - Cape Verde's Health minister Arlindo do Rosario confirmed on Wednesday the fourth positive case of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) in the archipelago.

According to him, it is a 43-year-old Cape Verdean citizen living in Praia, who arrived from France on March 18 and started to have a respiratory condition with cough and fever, the result of the examination for COVID-19 being positive.

The minister also informed the patient is "clinically stable, without fever and without shortness of breath" and receives "all the necessary care".

Cape Verde has so far reported four positive cases of COVID-19, with the first three on the island of Boa Vista, all foreign nationals.

The first confirmed case in the country, a 62-year-old English tourist, died on March 23 evening due to COVID-19. (XINHUA)



UGANDA

Uganda announces 14-day suspension of public transport to curb COVID-19 spread

KAMPALA, 25 March (XINHUA) - Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni on Wednesday announced a 14-day suspension of public transport as one of the measures aimed at stopping the spread of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) in the east African country.

Museveni in a televised address said all commuter taxis, buses, passenger trains and motorcycles commonly known as boda bodas are not allowed to move.

He said private vehicles are allowed to move provided they do not carry more than three people including the driver.

"Therefore even a private vehicle packed with family members is not allowed. That is why all those family functions should be postponed. Let us first get out of this danger," said Museveni.

He said cargo vehicles, ambulances and those of security services are allowed to move.

Museveni also banned crowding in markets, noting that markets should only be allowed to sell food.

"For now, we wouldn't like to close the markets but to carry out some changes. The markets should only be for selling food stuff. Therefore trading in markets for non-food stuff like clothes, mobile phones, and necklaces is from now onwards suspended. This will reduce numbers for social distancing," said Museveni.

The president also said government offices should work out a plan where essential staff can remain working. He said this can be on rotation basis.

He said there are several hubs across the country where samples can be taken before they are transported to the main laboratory, Uganda Virus Institute in Entebbe, 40 km south of the capital Kampala. He directed that districts in remote areas must be able to provide vehicles to the surveillance teams that will be collecting samples.

He said all the measures have been taken to reduce crowding of people as one of the critical measures in limiting the spread of COVID-19.

The president said the country currently has 14 confirmed cases of COVID-19. Five cases were confirmed on Wednesday, including two Chinese nationals.

He said out of the initial nine patients, eight are recovering and are in a stable condition.

Uganda already instituted a series of stringent measures aimed at containing the spread of the disease including the closure of its borders to incoming or outgoing international travelers.

The country has banned all public gatherings and closed schools, centers of worship.

Security agencies have also started arresting people who do not follow the guidelines set by the ministry of health. (XINHUA)



LIBERIA

Liberia's George Weah releases coronavirus single

MONROVIA, 25 March (AFP) - Liberian President George Weah released a coronavirus-themed single on Wednesday, using music to raise awareness about prevention measures in the impoverished West African state.

In his "Let's Stand Together and Fight Coronavirus", Weah explains how the virus is spread and urges hand washing to a backing of harmonised female vocals and upbeat guitar music from the group The Rabbis.

"From Europe to America, from America to Africa, take precautions, and be safe," the former football icon sings.

The roughly six-minute track also describes symptoms and explains how COVID-19 is mostly spread when people "touch their infected hands to their hands, nose or eyes".

The poor country of some 4.8 million people, which has banned travel to and from virus-stricken countries, has recorded three coronavirus cases to date.

As with other poor states in the region, there are fears about Liberia's capacity to respond to an outbreak.

The country was the worst affected by the 2014-16 West African Ebola outbreak, when more than 4,800 people died.

Weah's spokesman Solo Kelgbeh said the president produced a similar song during the Ebola crisis, and that he started working on the new single before coronavirus even reached Liberia.

The song serves a practical purpose, Kelgbeh said.

"Liberia is a country where a majority of the people doesn't have access to internet and Facebook, but everyone listens to radio," he noted.

"This song will be played on various radio stations in the country... to have the message spread sufficiently," Kelgbeh added.

Already decimated by back-to-back civil wars from 1989 to 2003, Liberia faces economic woes including rampant inflation and fuel shortages -- which are increasing pressure on Weah. (AFP)



BURKINA FASO

Number of COVID-19 cases in Burkina Faso rises to 146

OUAGADOUGOU, 25 March (XINHUA) - Thirty-two new cases of COVID-19 were reported on Wednesday in Burkina Faso, bringing the total number of cases to 146.

"As of March 25, 81 samples have been analyzed by health authorities and 32 new cases are confirmed, including 31 in Ouagadougou, capital of the country," said The Government Information Service, a government body to publish official information, on Wednesday in a statement.

The statement also declared three more cured cases. So far, the number of cured cases in the country stood at seven.

Five ministers of the country, the education minister, territorial administration minister, foreign minister, mining minister and trade minister have tested positive for COVID-19. The U.S. ambassador to Burkina Faso tested positive on March 22.

The government on March 20 evening announced a curfew throughout the territory from 7 p.m. (19:00 GMT) to 5 a.m., and a closure of land, air and rail borders. These measures have become effective from midnight March 21.

Burkina Faso reported its first confirmed COVID-19 case on March 9. (XINHUA)



NIGERIA

Nigerian army prepares for coronavirus lockdown, mass burials

ABUJA, March 25 (REUTERS) - The Nigerian Army is preparing to forcibly transfer the sick to hospital and enforce curbs on movement to try to shield the country from coronavirus, and is leasing equipment for "possible mass burial", according to an army memo seen by Reuters.

The memo from Army headquarters also outlines plans to protect government food storage from looters as Africa's most populous nation braces for the illness to spread further in the country.

"Following the rise and continuous spread in cases of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in Nigeria, the (Chief of Army Staff) has deemed it necessary for all to take protective measures to ensure the safety of (Nigerian Army) personnel and their families," the memo said.

There are currently 46 confirmed cases in Nigeria, and one death, but the infection has hit the top levels of society, infecting President Muhammadu Buhari's chief of staff.

With a population of 200 million, 20 million of whom are packed in the commercial capital of Lagos, many fear the virus could spread quickly without containment.

The memo said the army is suspending all leave passes for all personnel and called for them to be on "maximum security alert and be ready for deployment."

The virus has swept across the world, killing thousands and forcing millions into quarantine. Several nations have activated armed forces to help combat it.

South Africa deployed its army to enforce a 21-day lockdown that begins this week, and U.S. President Donald Trump activated the National Guard in New York, California and Washington.

The U.S., French and Moroccan armies have set up field hospitals, and Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered the army to carry out drills to increase readiness to fight coronavirus if necessary.

On Wednesday, Nigeria's Rivers state governor said he would close the borders to human movement in or out of the state starting on Thursday to protect it from coronavirus.

The state's capital city, Port Harcourt, is the gateway to the oil-rich Delta region, and companies such as Nigeria LNG and Royal Dutch Shell have key offices in the city. Neither company immediately commented on how the closure might affect their operations.

Oil provides more than half of Nigeria's government revenue. (REUTERS)



Nigerian politicians in self-isolation over virus scare

ABUJA, 25 March (AFP) - Senior Nigerian politicians, including a number of state governors and the vice president, were in self-isolation on Wednesday after coming into contact with two individuals infected with coronavirus.

Governor Godwin Obaseki of the southern state of Edo "has gone into self-isolation" and is undergoing a coronavirus test, his advisor, Crusoe Osagie, said in a statement.

"I just took a COVID-19 test, having gone into self-isolation since yesterday evening," Kayode Fayemi, the governor of Ekiti state, said on Twitter.

"I'm asymptomatic and feel well, but I was in meetings with two people who had since tested positive. I look forward to an all-clear and have encouraged all my colleagues to take the test."

Osagie said Obaseki had gone into self-isolation after Bala Mohammed, the governor of Bauchi state, and President Muhammadu Buhari's chief of staff, Abba Kyari, tested positive.

Mohammed said Tuesday that he had tested positive for the new virus.

Sources in the president's office and local media said that Kyari had also been confirmed positive.

Kyari, who according to the press is in his seventies, has the reputation of being Buhari's right-hand man.

The political elite "is in panic mode following the confirmed case of the chief of staff," said a source close to the presidency.

"As the engine room of government, (Kyari) has contact with various segments of the society.

So everybody who has had contact with him since he returned from Germany is jittery. Most of us are in self-isolation."

Sixteen governors were in direct contact with Kyari at a meeting of the ruling party attended also by Buhari and his vice president, Yemi Osinbajo.

"I have been inundated with calls on whether indeed the VP had undergone a COVID-19 test and the outcome. Yes he has, and (the) results (were) negative," his spokesman said.

Osinbajo also went into self-isolation as a precaution.

The wave of concern at the top level of Nigerian politics has sparked acerbic reactions on social media.

Many commentators noted that the country's elite typically went abroad for medical care, favouring Britain or the United States, rather than entrusting themselves to the country's rundown hospitals.

"STUCK!," said author Elnathan John. "Nowhere to run."

Buhari, 77, who was re-elected in February last year, made several trips to London during his first four-year term for a condition that has never been disclosed. (AFP)



SENEGAL

In coronavirus, Senegal rappers find a new enemy to fight

DAKAR, March 25 (REUTERS) - Dressed in hooded medical suits and protective goggles, Senegal's activist hip-hop group Y'en a Marre rap about washing hands, disposing of used tissues and avoiding crowds in their latest release: 'Shield against Coronavirus.'

The new video here marks a sudden change for the collective, named 'Enough is Enough' in French slang, which has a history of challenging authority, fighting social injustice - and urging Senegal's youth to hit the streets to protest the government.

ut when African countries confirmed their first coronavirus cases this month, the group offered to help the government persuade people to take the disease seriously, in an effort to stop it ripping through Africa as it has through China, Europe and America, killing thousands.

“As soon as we saw that things were going from bad to worse, we went to see the health ministry,” said Y’en a Marre’s Malal Talla, whose rapper alias translates as Sick Mad Man.

“We wanted to contribute how we could,” Talla said at the group’s headquarters in the crowded working class Dakar suburb of Guediawaye, where they work to support disadvantaged youth.

Senegal declared a state of emergency on Monday and imposed a curfew in response to the pandemic. It has confirmed over 80 cases, making it the second-worst affected country in West Africa after Burkina Faso.

After hearing Y’en a Marre’s song, the health ministry allowed the group to film its video in one of the capital’s main hospitals, where they posed as laboratory technicians, rapping as they examined test tubes and peered down microscopes.

“Prevention is better than treatment. The world is in distress,” the chorus intones, its plucked accompaniment giving the track a distinctive West African lilt.

The video has attracted thousands of views and likes on social media since its release last Thursday.

West Africa has long raised public health awareness through song. In 2014, musical heavyweights such as Salif Keita banded together to release ‘Africa Stop Ebola’ in the face of the epidemic that killed over 11,300.

Sitting in a courtyard painted with murals of black icons such as Nelson Mandela and Angela Davis, Talla said music had a vital role to play.

“In Africa, music is not the art of combining sounds,” he said. “It’s not just for dancing and jumping, it’s also a way one can raise awareness with joy.” (REUTERS)



MALI

Mali declares anti-coronavirus curfew, maintains parliamentary poll date

BAMAKO, 25 March (AFP) - Malian President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita announced a nationwide night-time curfew on Wednesday to limit the spread of coronavirus, but said a parliamentary vote planned for this week will go ahead.

In a televised address, Keita said the government will enforce a curfew between 21:00 to 05:00, from Thursday, and close land borders in response to the virus.

Freight will still be allowed into the West African state, he said, and markets will remain open.

Earlier on Wednesday, Malian authorities recorded the country's first coronavirus infections, in two nationals who had recently arrived from France.

Experts fear the country is particularly exposed to an outbreak because of its jihadist conflict, which first broke out in the north in 2012 and has since engulfed the centre.

Thousands of soldiers and civilians have died in the conflict, and swathes of Mali's territory remain outside state control.

Despite the coronavirus risk, Keita said that a long-delayed parliamentary election -- whose first round is planned for Sunday -- will go ahead, although in "scrupulous respect" of health measures.

"The government will do everything in its power to ensure that this is so," he said.

Holding parliamentary elections was a key recommendation from crisis talks in December, which aimed at exploring non-military solutions to the country's worsening violence.

Mali's current crop of MPs was elected in 2013, in a ballot won by Keita's Rally for Mali party.

Parliamentary elections were meant to take place again in late 2018 following Keita's re-election.

But the poll was postponed several times, with the authorities citing a strike by judges or worsening security. (AFP)



MOZAMBIQUE

Number of COVID-19 cases in Mozambique rises to five

MAPUTO, 25 March (XINHUA) - Mozambique's Health Minister Armindo Tiago said on Wednesday that the number of cases of COVID-19 in the country rose to five as two more individuals have tested positive.

Tiago made the announcement at a press conference in Maputo to update the information on the coronavirus.

"One of the new cases is that of a male person over 30 years old in Mozambique, residing in the city of Maputo, who returned from Portugal, having made a stopover in Austria and Switzerland in the first half of the current month," said Tiago.

The other case was registered in an individual, also male, over 30 years old, of Mozambican nationality, residing in the city of Maputo, who returned from Dubai, having made a stopover in South Africa, in the first half of March, he said.

"Of the five confirmed cases, four are imported and one is locally transmitted," said Tiago, adding at present that they have a cumulative total of 61 contacts under monitoring and that more test results remain to be seen.

The minister said that it is important to underline that the individuals, who test positive and have mild symptoms, are in home quarantine, according to the recommendations of the World Health Organization.

The health minister also said that the ministry is in contact with the South African government in order to prevent Mozambicans from leaving the country in large numbers to Mozambique, due to the lockdown scheduled to take effect on Thursday.

There are more than 2,400 confirmed cases of COVID-19 across Africa and about a third of the cases are in South Africa. Statistics showed that more than 40 of the continent's 54 countries now have the virus. (XINHUA)



NAMIBIA

Namibia announces travel ban, partial lockdown after seventh coronavirus case

WINDHOEK, March 25 (REUTERS) - Health Minister Kalumbi Shangula announced on Tuesday that travel into Namibia from all countries is banned with immediate effect for a period of 30 days after the Southwest African country recorded its seventh confirmed case of coronavirus.

Namibians and permanent residents of the country are also banned from leaving, and if they return from abroad they must go into mandatory supervised quarantine for 14 days at their own cost.

Those residents will only be allowed to return into the country if their mission is critical to national interest, such as the safety and security of Namibia, the minister added.

The government, however, added the flow of supplies, goods, commodities and services into Namibia from reciprocal neighboring countries will not be interrupted.

The government also announced a partial lockdown of the Khomas region, which houses the capital Windhoek and the Erongo region, home to the port town of Walvis Bay. The partial lockdown will start from midnight March 27 until midnight April 16.

The latest three coronavirus cases announced on Tuesday involve a Namibian male studying at Wits University in South Africa, who was tested there but only got his results after returning to Namibia.

President Hage Geingob told journalists that the extraordinary measures have been adopted with the sole purpose of protecting the health, security and safety of the Namibian people.

“During this difficult period, I call on all Namibians to cooperate with the authorities and to remain calm, in order to ensure that public order is not compromised. Allow the authorities to work unhindered,” the president said.

Government workers and state-owned entity employees have been advised to work from home in the next 14 days and all bars and township pubs are required to close at 18.00 daily, the health minister said as part of precautions against coronavirus.

Parliament has also been suspended for 21 days starting Wednesday to Thursday April 14.

The Namibian Police announced earlier they stand ready to enforce rules directing the public to remain at home and avoid public gatherings. (REUTERS)



ZIMBABWE

Zimbabwe nurses walk out, customs officials protest over coronavirus fears

HARARE, March 25 (REUTERS) - Nurses at Zimbabwe's state hospitals started walking off the job on Wednesday, saying the government had failed to respond to their demands for protective equipment as they brace for a battle against the coronavirus.

Customs officials at the country's biggest airport have also stopped reporting for work, fearing exposure to the coronavirus and a lack of measures to prevent its spread, their union said.

The virus has killed one person from three confirmed cases in Zimbabwe, although the opposition and critics of President Emmerson Mnangagwa accuse his government of under-reporting the number of cases.

The government denies this and Health Minister Obadiah Moyo says the government has set aside resources for the purchase of protective equipment.

"Our members think the government is not taking them seriously. We can't afford to lose nurses to this serious pandemic," Enoch Dongo, secretary general of the 18,000-member Zimbabwe Nurses Association said.

Junior doctors at Harare Central Hospital, the country's second biggest, have also withdrawn their services due to a lack of protective clothing to handle coronavirus patients, their union said.

Senior doctors at state hospitals said the government should consider a total lockdown of the country and equip all its medical facilities to handle coronavirus cases.

Most businesses and informal markets remained open despite Mnangagwa's order on Monday to shut all restaurants and pubs.

The Zimbabwe Revenue Authority Trade Union said its members at the main airport in the capital Harare came into contact with coronavirus while dealing with the man who died from it, but they were not tested or put into mandatory isolation.

"The workers shall not report for duty until proper measures are taken to substantially mitigate the danger," Lovemore Ngwarati, the union's secretary general, said.

Faith Mazani, commissioner general of Zimbabwe Revenue Authority, did not respond to calls and messages for comment.

Facing its worst economic crisis in a decade, Zimbabwe is grappling with soaring inflation and shortages of foreign currency and medicines that has crippled its hospitals.

Zimbabwe has begun receiving some of the protective and medical equipment donated to African countries by Chinese billionaire and Alibaba co-founder Jack Ma. (REUTERS)



Zimbabwe suspends electoral activities due to COVID-19 outbreak

HARARE, 25 March (XINHUA) - The Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) on Wednesday announced the suspension of all electoral activities in response to the COVID-19 pandemic which has so far claimed one life in the country.

ZEC chairperson Priscilla Chigumba said in a statement that in view of the declaration of the global coronavirus as a national disaster by President Emmerson Mnangagwa, all electoral activities were being suspended forthwith until further notice and pending a review of the situation.

"The suspension affects the conduct of a by-election which was due to be held in Ward 16 of Chiredzi Rural District Council on 4 April 2020 and the filling of any other vacancy which may arise during this period."

"New dates for the conduct of any by-election will be notified in due course," she said.

She said ZEC was taking several precautionary measures to protect its employees and the general public from infection.

The last by-election was held to fill a municipal vacancy in Chegutu at the weekend. (XINHUA)



SOUTH AFRICA

S. African virus carriers charged with attempted murder for not isolating

JOHANNESBURG, 25 March (AFP) - South African police have charged two men with attempted murder for allegedly continuing to go out after they tested positive for the coronavirus, exposing others to the infection.

Police minister Bheki Cele announced the charges on Wednesday during a press conference detailing the enforcement of an incoming lockdown meant to curb the spread of coronavirus.

"If you break these laws of regulations you are six months in, or fined, or both," said Cele.

"Two people have been charged already... who deliberately moved around after they were told" not to, he warned.

"So it's not a fairytale to say the law will act and act very harsh on you."

The first case was a 52-year old salon owner diagnosed with coronavirus on March 18 and instructed to quarantine for at least 14 days.

Police spokesperson Vish Naidoo said local officials raised the alert on Tuesday after the man was seen around the western city of Ladysmith, in KwaZulu-Natal province.

"(He) allegedly continued with his business... and in doing so disregarded the instructions by a doctor," Naidoo said, adding that the man had since been arrested and taken to hospital.

The second charge was filed against a male tourist who tested positive for COVID-19 while on holiday at Kruger National Park.

Naidoo said the man ignored instructions to remain in his hotel and went to the nearby town of Saint Lucia, where he interacted "with an unknown number of people".

South Africa has recorded the highest number of coronavirus infections on the continent, with 709 cases confirmed so far.

President Cyril Ramaphosa announced a 21-day lockdown after the number of infections multiplied six-fold in just eight days.

Only "essential" trips to grocery stores, pharmacies and medical appointments will be permitted during the lockdown, which will be enforced by army troops.

"The simplest and best way to combat the spread of the coronavirus is STAY HOME," the police said in a statement on Wednesday.

"It is exactly that stubborn behaviour that has caused us a national lockdown." (AFP)



EGYPT

Egypt's COVID-19 cases hit 456 with 21 deaths

CAIRO, 25 March (XINHUA) - The Egyptian Health Ministry announced on Wednesday that the total discovered cases of locals and foreigners infected with COVID-19 have reached 456 so far, including 21 deaths and 95 recoveries.

Egypt confirmed 54 new cases of COVID-19 on Wednesday, including the 40 cases announced by the country's health minister earlier in the day, and one death case of a 63-year-old Egyptian, said the ministry's spokesman Khaled Megahed in a statement.

"As many as 15 cases were cured and discharged from the quarantine hospital, including four foreigners and 11 Egyptians, raising the total number of recovered cases to 95, out of 113 cases whose tests turned from positive to negative for the virus," Megahed pointed out.

Egypt has recently taken strict precautionary measures to contain the spread of COVID-19, including temporary closure of schools, universities, museums and archeological sites,

reducing employees and sterilizing means of transport, government offices and tourist attractions.

On Tuesday, the Egyptian cabinet further announced a partial curfew nationwide from early evening to early morning and a complete shutdown of all entertainment places for the coming two weeks.

Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi said earlier on Wednesday that he is looking forward to the compliance of his people with the additional measures for the safety of the country and the citizens.

"We will pass through these difficult moments," said the Egyptian president, stressing that "we can succeed in our mission with the unity of everyone." (XINHUA)



LIBYA

Spotlight: Libya announces 1st COVID-19 case, but rival governments remain divided over combating coronavirus

TRIPOLI, 25 March (XINHUA) - Though Libya has detected the first case of novel coronavirus infection, the two rival governments have failed to unite on jointly fighting the virus.

Bard-Addin Al-Najjar, director of Libya's National Center for Disease Control, told Xinhua that the infected person is a 73-year-old man who returned from Saudi Arabia earlier in March.

"Until the second week of the virus incubation period, the patient did not show any symptoms. He went to a clinic and several tests' results were positive," Al-Najjar said.

The director pointed out that the patient, whose condition was stable, was admitted to the Tripoli Central Hospital, assuring that all measures are being taken to test all those who had contact with the patient.

The UN-backed Prime Minister Fayez Serraj recently declared a state of emergency and mobilization against the virus.

The government's measures against the coronavirus include closing airports, border crossings, education institutions and mosques, banning large gatherings, and imposing a curfew.

Serraj said that his government has allocated half a billion Libyan dinars (352 million U.S. dollars) to take protective measures against the virus.

Mahmoud Al-Shibli, a Libyan respiratory disease specialist, said that the rise in infections, especially among Libyan nationals who came from abroad, was expected, and that the containment efforts should be strengthened in the coming days.

"Infections of the novel coronavirus is a matter that should be taken seriously, especially as the medical system in Libya is weak and unable to deal with infection outbreaks," Al-Shibli said.

"Eastern and western authorities must unify their efforts and harness all the necessary capabilities to confront any outbreak of the virus in the country. Otherwise, the disaster would be severe and the numbers (of patients) will not be controlled," Al-Shibli said.

The Ministry of Health of the UN-backed government confirmed that it is preparing quarantine sites in several cities to meet coronavirus emergencies.

"The preparation of quarantine sites in the cities of Tripoli, Zuwara, Zliten and Ghadames is going well in terms of providing all needed equipment, which includes all the facilities for the patients and the medical teams," said Amin Al-Hashemi, information advisor at the Ministry of Health.

Seven quarantine sites are being set up currently, Al-Hashemi said, adding that there are plans to add more sites in other cities in Libya.

The Higher Committee to Combat the Coronavirus in eastern Libya decided to prohibit movement of people between the cities and regions until further notice.

The capital Tripoli has been witnessing a deadly armed conflict between the UN-backed government and the eastern-based army over control of the city since last year.

Despite the announcements by both parties to accept international calls for halting all military actions to fight the coronavirus, the rivals have been trading accusations over breaching the truce and targeting the civilians in Tripoli. (XINHUA)



MOROCCO

Morocco reports 55 new coronavirus cases, 225 in total

RABAT, 25 March (XINHUA) - The number of COVID-19 cases in Morocco has risen to 225 by Wednesday evening, an increase of 55 in the past 24 hours, Moroccan health ministry said in a statement.

According to the ministry, six deaths from the COVID-19 were reported and seven have recovered.

Morocco declared on Sunday a one-month state of medical emergency until April 20.

Morocco has closed all its land and sea borders, and suspended all international passenger flights starting March 15. (XINHUA)



TUNISIA

Tunisia coronavirus cases jump by around 50%

TUNIS, March 25 (REUTERS) - Tunisia has confirmed 59 new cases of the coronavirus, Health Minister Abdelatif el-Mekki said in a televised news conference on Wednesday, taking the total number to 173.

Tunisia has instituted a curfew at nights and a lockdown during the day in which people are only allowed out to buy food or medicine or work in some key sectors. (REUTERS)



EAST AFRICA



SOMALIA

Four killed in Mogadishu suicide bombing: police

MOGADISHU, 25 March (AFP) - At least four people were killed and seven others wounded on Wednesday when a suicide bomber blew himself up at a tea shop near a security checkpoint in Somalia's capital, police said.

The bomber, believed to be from the Al-Qaeda-linked Al-Shabaab Islamist group, walked into the cafe popular with security forces and civilians, and triggered an explosives vest.

"There are investigations going on but we believe the blast was carried by a Shabaab suicide bomber who detonated himself at a crowded tea-shop close to Sayidka intersection. Four civilians including the owner of the business died in the blast and seven others are wounded," said Ibrahim Mohamed, a senior police commander.

Witnesses described chaos after the blast.

"The security forces sealed off the area, but I saw ambulances carried several dead bodies and wounded people as well, people were panicking and the whole area was in chaos," said Sayid Ali who was in the area at the time of the attack.

No group claimed responsibility for the bombing, however Al-Shabaab carries out regular attacks against civilian and government targets. (AFP)



IMF, World Bank clear Somalia for debt relief, normal ties to world

WASHINGTON, 26 March (REUTERS) - The IMF and the World Bank on Wednesday said Somalia had taken the necessary steps to begin receiving debt relief, a key move that will allow the Horn of Africa country to lower its \$5.2 billion in external debt to around \$557 million.

The decision will immediately normalize Somalia's relations with the world after 30 years outside the international financial system, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank's International Development Association said.

Somalia's Paris Club creditors - including the United States, Russia, Italy and France - are expected to make a decision on debt relief for Somalia by the end of March, they said in a joint statement.

The announcement by the IMF and the World Bank will send a powerful signal to Somalia's Paris Club and non-Paris Club creditors about the country's future and the intense reform efforts it has undertaken over the past eight years.

Somalia, with a population of 15 million, is the 37th country to reach this “Decision Point” under the enhanced Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative.

The decision comes at a critical time for Somalia, which is grappling with the coronavirus outbreak, a recent desert locust swarm and is gearing up for elections later this year.

“Debt relief will help Somalia make lasting change for its people by allowing its debt to be irrevocably reduced from US\$5.2 billion at end-2018 to US\$557 million in net present value terms (NPV) once it reaches the HIPC Completion Point in about three years’ time,” the bank and the fund said.

The IMF said its Executive Board also approved a new three-year \$395 million financing arrangement for Somalia under its Extended Credit Facility (ECF) and Extended Fund Facility (EFF).

The World Bank was also considering a range of new IDA instruments to help Somali communities impacted by flooding, the locust invasion and prepare for the coronavirus threat.

That program would support Somalia’s implementation of its “ambitious reform agenda and catalyze concessional donor financing,” the IMF said.

Normalization of relations with the international community will re-open Somalia’s access to critical additional financial resources to strengthen the economy, help improve social conditions, raise millions out of poverty, and generate sustainable employment for Somalis, the IMF and World Bank said.

“We welcome Somalia’s efforts to restore stability, engage with creditors, and adopt a poverty reduction strategy,” said World Bank Group President David Malpass. “Resumption of regular financing to Somalia is an important landmark, and we look forward to further economic and social progress.”

IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva congratulated Somalia for the intense efforts that had laid the foundation for inclusive economic growth, but underscored the need for Somali authorities to sustain and implement their reforms. (REUTERS)



WEST AFRICA



GUINEA

US, UN condemn electoral violence in Guinea

CONAKRY, 25 March (AFP) - The United States and the United Nations on Wednesday condemned deadly outbreaks of violence in Guinea last week during the West African country's highly contested constitutional referendum.

In an implicit criticism of President Alpha Conde, the United States also said it shared international concerns about the fairness of the vote and the lack of political dialogue surrounding it.

The number of people killed since the referendum on Sunday is unclear.

The political opposition has said some 31 people have been killed since then, 21 of them in the southern city of N'Zerekore.

But the government on Tuesday said that only six people had been killed.

AFP was unable to independently confirm the death toll.

The referendum on changing the constitution has proved hugely controversial in the impoverished former French colony.

Guinea's government has argued that a new constitution is needed to enshrine gender equality.

But critics suspect that the real motive is to allow Conde, 82, to run for a third spell in office later this year.

At least 32 people were killed in months-long protests in the runup to Sunday's vote, according to an AFP tally.

On Wednesday, the US embassy in the capital Conakry condemned "all abuses", urging the government to "rapidly and transparently" investigate the violence.

The United Nations' special representative to West Africa, Mohamed Ibn Chambas, also condemned the violence, saying in a statement he was following developments "with great concern".

France has already said Sunday's vote was not credible.

Guinea's territorial administration minister, Bourema Conde, said Wednesday that most voters had gone to the polls "in discipline, serenity and total peace of mind".

He added however that some 450 polling stations had been ransacked across the country. (AFP)



NIGERIA

Nigerian military to resume operation against bandits in northern state: governor

LAGOS, 25 March (XINHUA) - Nigerian troops will resume full onslaught against unrepentant bandits in the northwest state of Zamfara, said Bello Matawalle, the state governor.

In a statement made available to Xinhua in Lagos, Nigeria's economic hub, the governor said the firepower which had already taken effect in the state had started yielding positive results.

It has led to the rescue of 13 kidnapped victims, the governor said, adding that the rescued victims had since undergone medical checkup at the state government's health facility and had been reunited with their family members.

The governor reiterated his administration's ban on the volunteer security group known as "San sa kai", it would deal decisively with "any traditional leader found to be supporting the activities of the outlawed group including losing his title.

He said the renewed military action had also led to the arrest of seven bandit informants, who would soon be moved to Abuja to face the consequences of their actions.

The state had in the last two months recorded a gradual and steady resurgence of armed bandits and kidnapers. (XINHUA)



12 kidnapped victims regain freedom in Nigeria

ABUJA, 25 March (XINHUA) - Twelve out of 19 kidnapped by gunmen earlier this week in Nigeria's northwestern state of Katsina regained freedom early Wednesday following a back-channel effort, according to a local official.

The victims were traveling from the central state of Niger to Katsina on Monday when gunmen who disguised as security men waylaid them, said Mustapha Mohammed Inuwa, secretary to the state government of Katsina.

Inuwa told reporters in the city of Katsina, the state capital, that the victims regained their freedom following negotiations between representatives of the government and the gunmen.

The remaining seven were held back by the gunmen, the government's scribe said, but assured that they would also regain their freedom soon.

The 12 freed hostages have since reunited with their families. (XINHUA)



SOUTHERN AFRICA



MOZAMBIQUE

Mozambique insurgents stage second major attack in three days

Maputo, 25 March (AFP) - Suspected jihadists on Wednesday staged a second brazen attack in northern Mozambique in three days, seizing and destroying a police station, sources said.

On Monday the jihadists surrounded Mocimboa da Praia, a town in the gas-rich province of Cabo Delgado, attacking a military base, ransacking government buildings and hoisting their flag before pulling back.

At dawn on Wednesday, they raided the town of Quissanga, a police officer in Macomia, around 50 kilometres (30 miles) away, told AFP.

"In 20 minutes or so the police surrendered and they (the Islamists) captured the district police headquarters and destroyed it," the sources said.

A photograph seen by AFP showed eight masked and camouflaged fighters, armed with rifles and rocket-propelled grenades, posing in front of the partly burned offices.

One of them hoisted a black-and-white flag with Arabic inscriptions on it.

"Many people are fleeing by boat, trying to escape to the (provincial) capital Pemba," 60 kms away by sea, a journalist there said.

The Islamic State Central Africa Province (ISCAP), affiliated with the so-called Islamic State group, claimed Monday's attack.

"Clashes took place with a variety of weapons, which led to killing and wounding dozens of elements, while the rest of them fled, and the mujahideen captured weapons, ammunition and multiple vehicles, then returned safely to their positions," it said in a statement released late Tuesday.

The toll could not be verified independently, and the government has not released any figures.

Cabo Delgado has been battered by jihadist attacks since October 2017, although the identity of the assailants remains unclear.

Locals call the group Al-Shabaab, but it is not linked to the group of the same name operating in battle-scarred Somalia.

More than 700 people have been killed, according to Doctors Without Borders (MSF), and at least 100,000 people have been displaced, according to the United Nations and humanitarian agencies.

President Filipe Nyusi vowed to stem the Cabo Delgado attacks after he was sworn in for a second five-year term in January.

But government troops have been struggling to restore order, despite pressure by oil giants to deploy more soldiers in the area. (AFP)



ZIMBABWE

Zimbabwe's nurses strike over lack of virus protective gear

HARARE, 25 March (AFP) - Thousands of hospital nurses in Zimbabwe went on strike Wednesday over a lack of protective gear and water shortages days after the country reported its first coronavirus cases, their union said.

Zimbabwe has recorded three cases in less than a week and one of the patients, a 30-year-old broadcaster, died on Monday.

The southern African country's public health system has been suffering for many years from a lack of equipment and medicines, and there are fears it will struggle to cope with the outbreak.

In a notice to government, the nurses are demanding personal protective equipment, water and a coronavirus risk allowance.

"We attend to so many people, some of whom could be infected, so our chances of catching the disease are very high," Zimbabwe Nurses Association president Enock Dongo told AFP.

"We commute to and from work and would spread the disease all over the place."

"The government should at least try to provide us with the required protective gear," he said.

He accused the government of "showing a lack of concern" and said healthcare workers have not been informed about the disease which has killed more than 19,200 and infected 427,940 people in 181 countries.

"While we accept nobody knew this disease was coming, the government has been very slow in educating us about it," he said during a phone interview.

"We are in the frontline of the fight against coronavirus, and it's embarrassing when people confront us with information from the internet, and we can neither confirm nor deny it," Dongo said.

Some 15,000 nurses work in Zimbabwe's public hospitals.

The COVID-19 pandemic will test Zimbabwe's already weak health delivery system.

The country saw a second death two days after the patient tested positive.

His family said the isolation facility where he died had neither the drugs nor a ventilator needed to treat his condition.

The government has claimed for weeks that it is prepared for the pandemic. (AFP)



NORTH AFRICA



ALGERIA

Algeria court confirms hefty sentences in ex-PMs' graft appeal

ALGIERS, 25 March (AFP) - An Algerian appeals court has upheld sentences of over ten years in prison for two former prime ministers under ex-president Abdelaziz Bouteflika following an unprecedented corruption trial, a judicial source said Wednesday.

The Algiers court sentenced Ahmed Ouyahia and Abdelmalek Sellal to 15 and 12 years jail time respectively, confirming a ruling by a lower court on December 10 last year.

The two premiers had served under president Abdelaziz Bouteflika, who was forced to resign in April last year by enormous street protests against his bid for a fifth term in office.

They were the first former prime ministers to be put on trial since Algeria's independence from France in 1962.

"This verdict on appeal is still a political ruling," Sellal's lawyer Mourad Khader told AFP.

They now have eight days to appeal to the Supreme Court.

Scandals within Algeria's auto industry -- including murky funding for Bouteflika's aborted re-election bid -- were at the heart of the case, which also resulted in prison terms for other former ministers and businessmen close to the ex-president's regime.

Financing for the longtime leader's campaign had "cost the treasury an estimated 110 billion dinars (more than to \$890 million)", the prosecutor said.

The auto industry scandal led to the loss of an estimated 128 billion dinars of public funds, according to official figures.

Other rulings handed down by the appeal court reduced sentences for former Algerian ministers and businessmen also standing trial.

Two former industry ministers, Mahdjoub Bedda and Youcef Yousfi, initially sentenced to ten years in prison, had their jail terms halved.

Businessman Ali Haddad, founder and CEO of private construction firm ETRHB and former head of Algeria's main employers' organisation who was considered a principal funder of Bouteflika's last electoral campaign, had his seven-year prison sentence reduced to four.

But for his lawyer Khaled Bourayou, it was still an "unjustifiable verdict".

"As long as justice is instrumentalised, we can't expect anything else," he said of the ruling, adding that the plaintiffs will appeal to the Supreme Court.

Two owners of vehicle assembly plants, Hassen Arbaoui and Mohamed Bairi, received sentences of four and three years in prison respectively.

Since March 1, around twenty former politicians, powerful businessmen and senior officials have been judged on appeal in corruption cases.

Other trials await some defendants named in the wide-ranging investigations into alleged corruption that were launched after Bouteflika's departure.

Huge protests against cronyism have continued in Algeria despite Bouteflika's resignation and the election of a new president in December, with activists demanding a complete overhaul of the political system and removal of Bouteflika-era figures.

While some have welcomed the trials of figures in his entourage, including his powerful brother Said and two former intelligence chiefs, many fear that they amount to little more than a power struggle between regime "clans". (AFP)



EGYPT – SOUTH SUDAN

Egypt reiterates support for peace in South Sudan

CAIRO, 25 March (XINHUA) - Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi reiterated on Wednesday his country's support for the recent agreement on the formation of a transitional unity government in South Sudan to achieve peace in the country.

Sisi's remarks came during a phone call he received from South Sudanese President Salva Kiir, who expressed appreciation of Egypt's efforts to support peace in his country, Egyptian presidential spokesman Bassam Rady said in a statement.

In February, Kiir and ex-vice president and later opposition leader Riek Machar announced the formation of a transitional unity government to end the civil war in South Sudan. Machar was also sworn in as the first vice president of the country, besides three other vice presidents.

The Egyptian president stressed the necessity for all South Sudanese parties to continue working on implementing the items of the agreement, said the Egyptian statement.

For his part, Kiir affirmed "South Sudan's keenness to continue enhancing different aspects of joint cooperation with Egypt in the coming period," Rady said.

Gaining independence from Sudan in 2011, South Sudan has been suffering a civil war since late 2013 following Kiir's dismissal of Machar over a conspiracy suspicion.

The conflict has claimed the lives of several thousand in South Sudan and displaced about a third of the country's 12-million population.

The unity government formation is based on a 2018 revitalized peace deal signed in Ethiopia.

Under the agreement, the government and opposition groups are tasked with establishing a unified national army to avoid repetition of violence that ruined a 2015 peace agreement. (XINHUA)



LIBYA

Libya's east-based army says repels UN-backed gov't forces' attack on air base

TRIPOLI, 25 March (XINHUA) - Libya's east-based army said on Wednesday that the army has repelled an attack by the forces of the rival UN-backed government on Alwatya air base, some 130 km southwest of the capital Tripoli.

The UN-backed government's forces suffered great losses to the east-based army, Ahmad al-Mismari, spokesman of the army, told a press conference in the eastern city of Benghazi.

He also accused the government forces of indiscriminately shelling residential neighborhoods in Tripoli.

Earlier on Wednesday, the UN-backed government's forces announced the takeover of Alwatya air base from the east-based army and capture of a number of soldiers.

Since April 2019, the east-based army has been leading a military campaign in and around Tripoli, attempting to take control of the city and overthrow the UN-backed government.

Thousands have been killed and injured in the fighting, and more than 150,000 have fled their homes away from the violence. (XINHUA)



Libya battles escalate as coronavirus arrives in country

TUNIS, 25 March (REUTERS) - Battles erupted around Tripoli on Wednesday following intensified bombardment of the Libyan capital, defying international pleas for a truce to tackle the coronavirus after the first case was confirmed in the country.

The internationally recognised Government of National Accord (GNA) launched an assault on several fronts early in the day, including an attack on an airbase west of Tripoli, according to both sides.

However, later on Wednesday the Libyan National Army (LNA) of eastern-based commander Khalifa Haftar said its forces moved from repelling the attack to capturing territory near Zuwara, 30 miles (45km) north.

"Attacks and counterattacks in Libya continue to inflict further suffering and civilian casualties," the U.N. mission said in a tweet, calling for an immediate halt to the violence.

Residents of Tripoli, seat of the GNA, said the shelling was the worst in weeks, shaking windows in the city centre miles from the front line in the southern suburbs.

“We are done in this country. There is a war and we hear clashes all day, fearing a missile will fall near us. Now there is coronavirus. If it spreads in Libya, I think we can only pray,” said Issa, 30, a shop owner in Tripoli.

The LNA has been trying to capture the capital for almost a year, backed by the United Arab Emirates, Egypt and Russia. The GNA is supported by Turkey and allied Syrian fighters.

An LNA shelling attack last week drew U.N. condemnation after it killed four girls and young women. On Tuesday, shells hit a prison in an area held by the GNA, also drawing U.N. anger.

ESCALATION

Pro-GNA forces attacked al-Watiya airbase, 125 km (80 miles) west of Tripoli and the closest such facility to the capital in LNA hands, early on Wednesday, leading to intense clashes.

“In response to the heaviest bombardments Tripoli has seen, we launched a series of counter attacks against Haftar,” Mohamed Geblawi, spokesman for the Libyan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, said in a statement.

Geblawi cited what he called “indiscriminate shelling” by the LNA after both sides had agreed to a ceasefire to tackle the coronavirus.

The LNA spokesman Ahmed Mismari said it was the pro-GNA forces that had broken the truce. The LNA had repulsed the attack and later captured the areas of Zaltan, al-Jameel, al-Assa and Raqdal in near the GNA-held town of Zuwara, he said.

A fighter in the pro-GNA forces said the battle would continue. “It was a successful operation during the progress and the attack, and these operations will continue,” he said by phone.

The escalation in the fighting could spell disaster for Libya’s already fragmented and badly stretched health system in handling the coronavirus, after authorities confirmed the first case of the disease late on Tuesday.

“Libyans have suffered for years under this brutal conflict, and now they face yet another threat to their health and wellbeing,” said Elizabeth Hoff, the World Health Organisation representative in Libya.

U.N. Secretary General Antonio Guterres had called for a complete ceasefire in conflicts around the world as governments and local authorities struggle with a pandemic that has spread to most countries.

“We sit at home hearing the clashes, which are a daily routine since 2011. But now we are scared of coronavirus. I am scared for my family. Libya doesn’t have a good healthcare system,” said Akram, a 28-year-old barista in Tripoli with three children. (REUTERS)

