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## Obstacles to COVID-19 control in east Africa

Controversial political decisions, mistrust, and limited epidemiological data complicate the response to the COVID-19 pandemic in east Africa. Esther Nakkazi reports.



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In a new study released on May 7, WHO has warned that up to 190 000 people in Africa could die of COVID-19 and 29 million to 44 million could get infected in the first year of the pandemic if containment measures fail.

While countries like Kenya and Uganda have responded to COVID-19 with curfews and partial and full lockdowns and all have put in place strict measures on physical distancing, Tanzania President John Magufuli has said COVID-19 is the work of the devil and public worship in churches and mosques should continue because prayer can defeat coronavirus disease.

Catholic bishop Siverine Niwemugizi of the Rulenge-Ngara diocese told *The Lancet Infectious Diseases* that the president contradicted government orders that called for suspension of mass gatherings. In his own Rulenge-Ngara Catholic diocese, Bishop Niwemugizi suspended celebration of public mass and community prayers for a month. His congregation and the Lutheran diocese of Karagwe now use radio for worship.

Meanwhile, with disparities in the response to COVID-19 in many African countries the authorities are trying to isolate sources of infections. For Tanzania's neighbours, truck drivers seem to be a source of new cases. Kenya, Uganda and Zambia have introduced border closures and tighter preventive measures on truck drivers' movements. However, they are a crucial part of the supply chain for landlocked countries like Uganda and Rwanda. Uganda President Yoweri Museveni said that to do away with cargoes would be "suicidal" and that truck driver movements within the country and between neighbouring countries has to continue. Diana Atwine, the

permanent secretary at the Ugandan Ministry of Health said that the current focus is reducing the time of getting results for the truck drivers and tracing internal community infections and contacts.

Yet, testing for COVID-19 has been another source of controversy in the region: for 2 weeks the Tanzania Ministry of Health has stopped releasing COVID-19 updates citing fake COVID-19 test kits on the market and fear mongering. The last update was issued on Apr 26 and indicated 480 confirmed cases and 16 deaths in Tanzania. The data combined results from Tanzania mainland and Zanzibar island.

President Magufuli said that coronavirus test kits were defective after samples were reportedly taken from sheep and goats and then sent to the National Health Laboratory without the lab technicians knowledge of the contents. The laboratory's director Nyambura Moremi and the quality assurance manager Jacob Lusekelo remain suspended pending investigations, heightening concerns as to whether further results on tested samples will be released. Tumaini Haonga, the National Coordinator for COVID-19 Response told the local media that it was decided that a comprehensive report of the cases will be issued by the ministry of Health. In the meantime, testing is ongoing and results would be announced at an opportune time.

The Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and WHO Africa rejected Magufuli's assertion that his nation's tests for SARS-CoV-2 are faulty. "There is so much misinformation around the pandemic that we need to find ways to be reassured that the test kits we are using for COVID19 diagnosis are highly efficient", said

Lillian Benjamin Mwakoyosi, a medical doctor and community advocate. "Much as I would want to ignore that maybe it was human or machine error, it sends a big message that we really need to give attention to how our samples are collected, handled up until we get the results including potential chances of sample contamination."

Elisha Osati, the President of the Medical Association of Tanzania told *The Lancet Infectious Diseases* that a committee has been formed to investigate the ongoing concerns which would inform them on what exactly happened. "Tanzania is investigating a lot of things right now around COVID-19 and we are in no position to comment."

Matshidiso Moeti, the WHO Regional Director for Africa, said that they are convinced that the tests kits in circulation are not contaminated with the virus. She said: "I am sorry we do not share the point of view that the kits are in circulation when they are already contaminated with the virus".

Moeti said WHO encourages countries to use knowledge, science, and evidence for the implementations they ask them to undertake. "We are pleased to share experiences of evidence of countries that have taken some of these measures like stopping large social gatherings (in Asia) that have helped to stop the virus", said Moeti.

She also said that the WHO Tanzania team is available and ready to engage with the Tanzanian national leaders to help with the implementation of the control measures for COVID-19. They would also like Tanzania to contribute to find a solution to the potential role of truck drivers as a primary source of COVID-19 transmission in the east African region.

Esther Nakkazi