

COVID-19 in southern Africa: Current scenario in Namibia

To the Editor: Since the outbreak of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) reported in Wuhan, Hubei Province, China, the infection was spread over the world at a time where no vaccine or antiviral treatment for COVID-19 exists. Namibia had 2 470 COVID-19-positive cases as at 30 August 2020, and 12 deaths and 211 recoveries were reported. COVID-19 influences people's livelihood, socioeconomic and educational systems, tourism and daily labour. In the absence of drugs and a vaccine against COVID-19, several measures have been taken. However, Namibia needs to further strengthen preventive measures to limit the spread of the disease over the population.

The epidemic of COVID-19 began in December 2019 in China. On 30 January 2020, the World Health Organization Director-General declared the outbreak a public health emergency of international concern. It has created a new public health challenge in the world.^[1,2]

At the time of writing, there are over 24 854 140 confirmed cases in 213 countries and territories. More than 838 924 deaths have been reported globally.^[3] On 3 February 2020, the first case of COVID-19 was detected in Egypt in a 33-year-old foreign male, followed by another case in Nigeria.^[4]

To date, in Africa high number of deaths have been reported in South Africa (625 056 cases, 14 028 deaths), Egypt (98 727 cases, 5 399 deaths), Algeria (44 146 cases, 1 501 deaths), Nigeria (53 865 cases, 1 013 deaths) and Namibia (2 470 cases, 12 deaths), among others.^[5]

Scenario in Namibia

The Republic of Namibia is located in the southern African region. Namibia borders the Atlantic Ocean in the west, Zambia and Angola in the north, Botswana in the east and South Africa, an epicentre of COVID-19 in Africa, in the south and east. On 14 March 2020, the first COVID-19 case reached Namibia. Almost immediately, on 17 March, the Minister of Health and Social Services declared a state of COVID-19 emergency, introducing a series of health procedures such as the closure of all borders, postponement of gatherings and related economic resolutions.^[6] These policies were followed by the establishment of an emergency response team that aimed to strengthen measures against COVID-19. Currently, as of 5 August 2020, Namibia has recorded 2 470 COVID-19 confirmed cases, 12 deaths and 211 recovered cases.

On 31 July 2020, COVID-19 statistics showed that 39 healthcare providers had tested positive for COVID-19 out of all reported cases in Namibia. From the perspective of the entire country, it is stated that 96.7% are locally transmitted cases, while 3.3% are imported from other countries as people flock back to Namibia. More males (58.1%) have tested positive for COVID-19 than females (41.9%).^[7] The Erongo region (89.9%) has been reported to have the highest number of positive cases, followed by the Khomas region (6.1%), the capital region of Namibia. Epidemiologically, the most affected age group is 20 - 49 years old (77.3%), while those >60 years old constitute 2.7% of the positive population. To date, Namibia has recorded 12 deaths due to COVID-19, and more than 211 recoveries.^[8] The country has a

call centre for COVID-19 inquiries and information, to answer general enquiries from the public, assisting persons seeking guidance from the Ministry of Health.

Is Namibia prepared for the COVID-19 outbreak?

The response to COVID-19 requires extraordinary effort from all Namibians. When Namibia reported <5 positive cases of COVID-19 in March 2020, the government enforced measures for the initial stage of COVID-19. On 17 March 2020, the government declared a state of emergency for the whole country. On 27 March at 23h59, two regions, Khomas and Erongo, were locked down until 17 April 2020. The reason for locking down these two regions was to maintain maximum suppression of transmission, because of their exposure to international travel.^[7] On 30 April, President Hage Geingob announced the gradual reopening of the economy in various stages. Before moving to each subsequent stage, reviews were undertaken to enable the government to agree on what activities should be allowed.

With the increasing number of COVID-19-infected people among Namibians, the government took extraordinary measures to control the outbreak.

Tourism and daily labour are the most affected sectors. Most tourist attraction sites, which are sources of livelihood for thousands of people, were closed owing to the COVID-19 outbreak. In addition, COVID-19 disrupted labour and created a socioeconomic crisis. It has also increased vulnerability and created challenges for individuals, communities and populations, requiring different types of policy interventions. Efforts to fight against COVID-19 will not be a sprint but a marathon that demands collective endurance from all Namibians in both the private and the public sectors.^[7]

Therefore, to call upon the courage to wage an enduring battle and prevail against this invisible enemy should be the way forward. The US embassy has provided assistance evaluated at NAD100 million to fight COVID-19. This assistance, including medical equipment, testing kits and technical experts from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, has been embedded in teams with Namibian counterparts from both the private and public health sectors.

In addition to the global response towards COVID-19, non-governmental organisations and health partnership organisations are working closely together to enhance the health system and prevent the spread of COVID-19 in Namibia.^[8] Local communities and community health workers around Namibia contribute to increased community awareness of COVID-19.^[9] The government is to be commended for its decision to take serious steps at the beginning of the outbreak, and the people for the efforts they made and are making to stay home during the lockdown, from March until the end of the COVID-19 state of emergency, which has not yet been declared. It was planned in five stages. The first stage was a full lockdown, with guidelines; the second stage was a lockdown with an ease in restrictions and guidelines; the third stage was a moderate reopening of the country and economy, with some restrictions and guidelines; the fourth stage resembles the 'new normal' for most

citizens, with restrictions and health guidelines, and the fifth stage has not yet been decided on by health departments.^[10] Finally, with motivational messages for communities, infection prevention and control measures and quarantine legislation, and appropriate messages such as daily briefings and updates, the situation in terms of public health messaging has had great positive consequences in controlling COVID-19 in Namibia.

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