

South Africa and Covid-19: Responses and Challenges

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Introduction

After first appearing in China last December, more than three million people have been contaminated with the novel coronavirus, coupled with around 218,000 fatalities and nearly 929,000 recoveries. South Africa has Sub-Saharan Africa's highest number of Covid-19 infections. As of

29 April, there have been over 4,990 confirmed cases and 93 deaths. The country declared its first case on March 5, 2020. The patient was a South African national who returned from an overseas trip from Italy. In the subsequent weeks, the spread of the disease took on an exponential shape, similar to many countries, including the United States and the UK.

Covid-19 Statistics in South Africa*

TESTS CONDUCTED

185 497

POSITIVE CASES IDENTIFIED

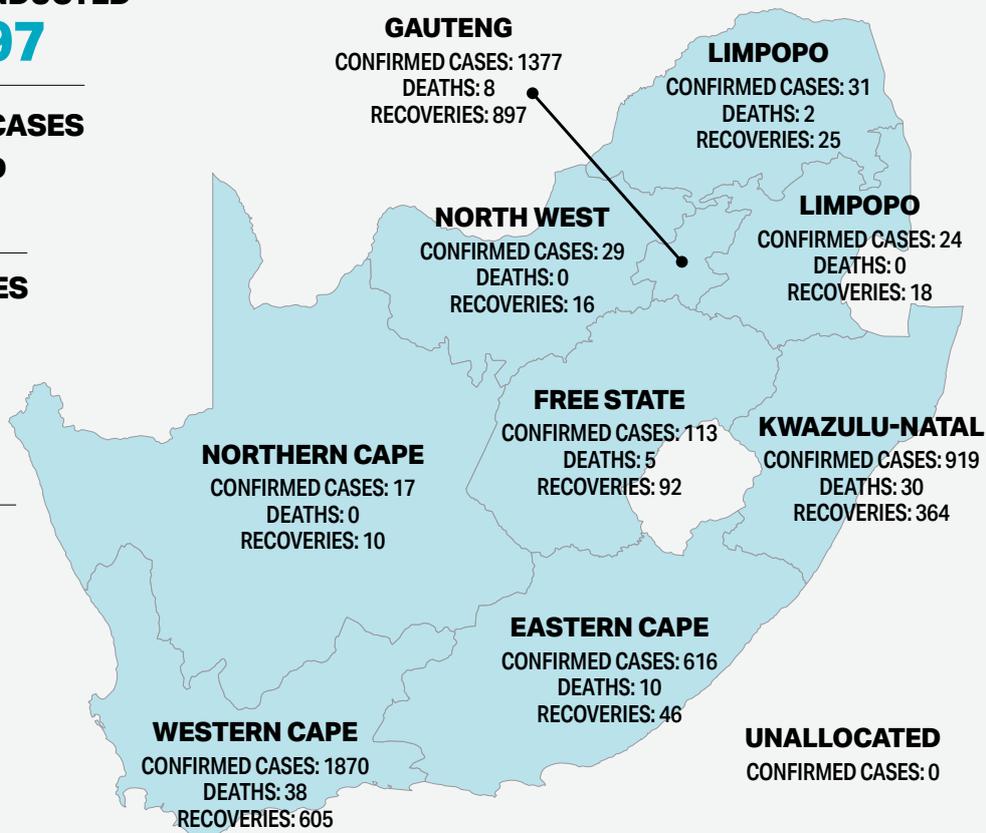
4996

RECOVERIES

2073

DEATHS

93



*28 APRIL 2020

Source: sacoronavirus.co.za

Responses

The South African Government took a number of measures to slow the spread of the virus. First, on 15 March, ten days after the first case of the infection, President Cyril Ramaphosa announced a national state of emergency, which effectively banned travellers from high-risk countries, suspended mass gatherings, closed more than half of its land borders and shut down educational institutions. On 27 March, the government imposed a 21-day lockdown, closing all borders and restricting all movements except for essential purposes such as grocery shopping, medical needs, or collecting welfare payments.

South Africa's Lockdown:

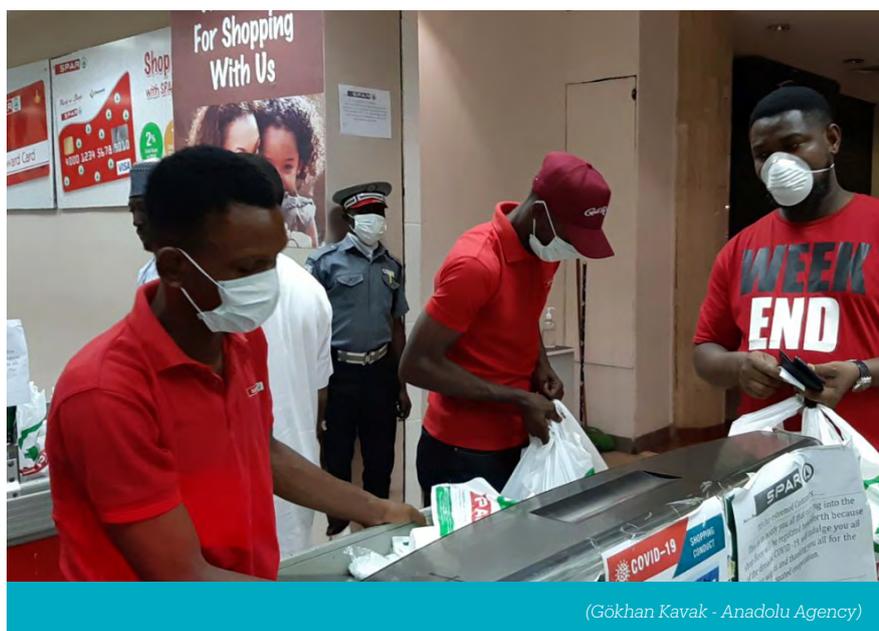
- i. Shipping is restricted to food and other essentials
- ii. Sale of alcohol and cigarettes is prohibited
- iii. Walking for exercise is banned
- iv. Public gatherings are banned
- v. Funerals are restricted to 50 people
- vi. Army and police have been deployed to ensure compliance

The South African government repatriated nationals stranded in foreign countries, most notably areas widely affected by the epidemic such as the US, Brazil, Italy, and even Nigeria. Furthermore, authorities initiated policies to mitigate the socio-economic impact of the infection.

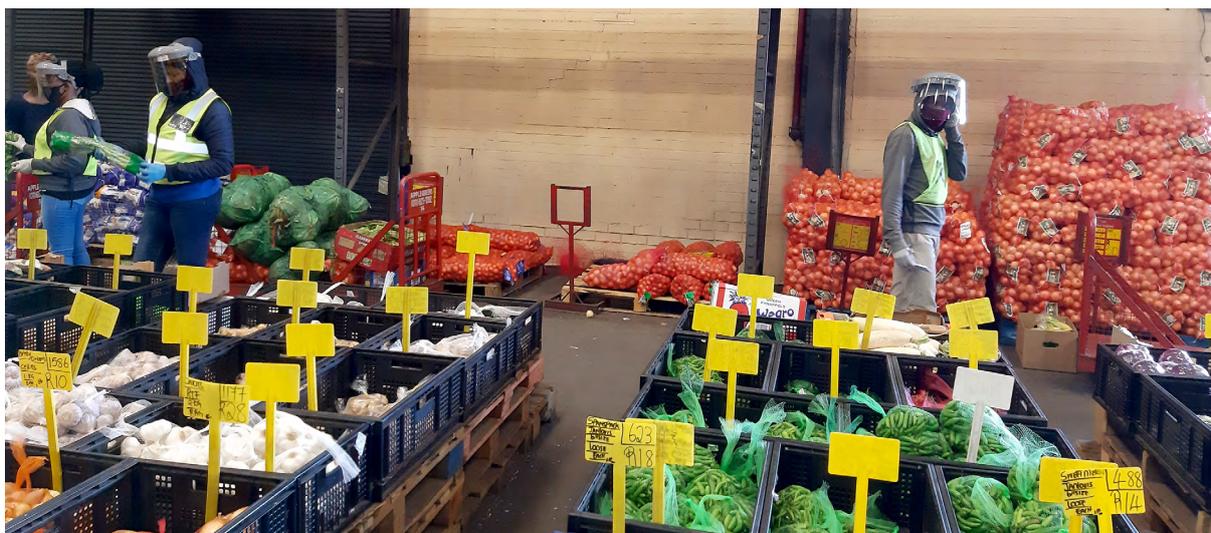
- First, the government has set aside a R40 billion (\$2.2 billion) Unemployment Insurance Fund; an emergency bailout intervention to help laid-off workers, as part of the effort to prevent job losses due to the nationwide lockdown.
- Second, the South African Central bank has slashed interest rates to 4.25 per cent from 5.25 per cent (a record post-apartheid low) to support the economy during the Covid-19 crisis. Less than a month ago, the bank introduced an earlier cut of the same magnitude.
- Third, a solidarity campaign has been declared

to support poor families and those in need. In this regard, authorities have distributed food to vulnerable people (including the homeless), throughout the country to prevent starvation and potential death as a result of the lockdown.

- Fourth, President Ramaphosa, his deputy and cabinet members announced they would take a 33 per cent pay cut in the next three months as a show of compassion and generosity and contribution to the country's fight against the coronavirus.
- Fifth, the government announced the country's biggest-ever stimulus plan to confront the economic impact of the coronavirus infection. In this regard, President Ramaphosa introduced a plan to inject R500 billion (\$26.3 billion) – approximately 10 per cent of GDP - into a social and economic support package. It is South Africa's biggest one-off stimulus injection, which is almost ten times the amount spent in preparation for hosting the 2010 FIFA World Cup. The plan is expected to help the struggling economy during the lockdown respond to the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Finally, the government of South Africa has been part of an African voice calling for international financial assistance to the continent to support efforts to tackle the infection. For example, on 23 March, Tito Mboweni, South African Minister of Finance, co-chaired a virtual meeting of African finance ministers that called for \$100 billion in immediate international emergency to fund Africa's Covid-19 fight.



(Gokhan Kavak - Anadolu Agency)



A view of Joburg Market before the curfew takes place amid coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic precautions in Johannesburg, South Africa on April 19, 2020. (Yasin Cenan - Anadolu Agency)

Challenges

Although South Africa is one of the few African governments that have the capacity to manage a centralised strategy during the epidemic, several challenges remain that have the potential to severely impair its efforts to curb the infection.

The first is, of course, healthcare. In the first three weeks of the outbreak, South Africa has witnessed a dramatic rise in the daily rate of Covid-19 infections. Based on infection curves of other countries, scientists projected the total cases to reach 4000 by 2 April with an average of 142 cases per day. However, the number of daily infections has decreased significantly and has remained between 70-80 cases per day. On 29 April, South Africa had 4,996 confirmed cases and 75 fatalities.

Observers believe that the three weeks of the lockdown have decreased the spread of the virus. In addition to the lockdown, the South African government initiated a mass testing campaign and ramped up its surveillance and tracking plans. For example, since 5 March, the South African government has conducted a total of 143,570 tests. It is believed that the country's sizable health research and disease-tracking capacity, coupled with many years of HIV and tuberculosis epidemic experience, have helped the government to implement swift testing and surveillance measures. The country has one of the highest infections of TB and HIV in the world and it has made progress in combatting both infections. Like the coronavirus, tuberculosis is a respiratory infection transmitted through droplets and remains a key public health threat in South Africa. Approximately [450,000 people](#), of which 270,000 of them are living with HIV, catch the infection annually, resulting in ap-

proximately 89,000 deaths. For many years, South African authorities have managed to bring the TB under control through a contact tracing operation. The country is now [capitalising](#) on this experience to confront the Covid-19 epidemic.

Public health officials believe that the lockdown has bought the country time to prepare for a peak in Covid-19 infections. However, experts argue that it is too early to conclude that the lockdown has made major progress and have warned that it could even lead to complacency. The government has said the drop of the infection cases is due to the lockdown, and authorities have hinted at the extension of the current nationwide restrictions to the end of April.

In 2019, South Africa, Africa's most industrialised economy, projected an economic growth of 1.7 per cent for 2020. However, a number of factors, including a fall in government revenue, debt and constant electricity shortages, have stalled growth. The Covid-19 pandemic is expected to complicate the current economic fragilities in South Africa, further stagnating economic growth. According to the South African Reserve Bank, the economy is now likely to contract by more than 6 per cent in 2020 due to the pandemic, compared with its forecast for a 0.2 per cent fall made in early last month. A persistent lockdown will be expected to increase job losses with further negative consequences for domestic demand. Inflation is expected to remain well within its target range between 3 and 6 per cent throughout this year. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) projects South Africa's national GDP will record a [5.8 per cent](#) contraction in 2020.

The South African economy was already facing difficulties prior to adopting anti Covid-19 measures. The economy was experiencing many years of sluggish growth and high unemployment, which currently stands around 30 per cent. On 27 March, the credit rating agency Moody's lowered South Africa's sovereign credit rating to [junk status](#)—the lowest investment-grading - for the first time in 25 years--due to a rapid rise in debt and a legacy of graft. The debt burden has severely limited the government's capacity to stimulate the economy during the Covid-19 lockdown. Civil society groups have voiced concerns that the lockdown might lead to humanitarian catastrophe if the government is unable to provide support to the poor and vulnerable. In response, the state announced that the government is engaged in lobbying for global financial assistance to help its response to the pandemic. The Rand - South Africa's national currency - has lost more than a fifth of its value against the US Dollar so far in 2020. It is believed the devaluation is partly due to the retreat by investors to safe havens during the pandemic.

Another concern relates to the social impact of the virus. Despite more than 25 years of democracy after the end of the apartheid system, South Africa remains the most economically unequal country in the world according to global development and financial institutions such as the World Bank and IMF. The inequality largely results from skewed income distribution, uneven access to opportunities as well as geographic factors, including regional disparities. According to the 2019 World Bank [figures](#), approximately 20 per cent of all income goes to top 1 per cent earners, 65 per cent goes to 10 per cent while remaining South African citizens receive 35 per cent of the aggregate income.

Conclusion

With 4,996 confirmed cases and 93 deaths, as of 29 April, South Africa is currently the most Covid-19 affected country in Africa after Egypt. The government declared its first Covid-19 case on 5 March and imposed a complete lockdown on 27 March. The anti-coronavirus measures included banning travellers from high-risk countries, suspension of mass gatherings, border closures, and school suspensions. Following the restrictions, the daily cases of the infection have declined.

To mitigate the socio-economic risks of the pandemic, the South African government has adopted a number of measures. These include an emergency bailout intervention to help laid-off workers, reduction of interest rates, food distribution to support poor families as well as seeking inter-

national financial assistance to support efforts to tackle the disease. Although South Africa has large social protection schemes, mounting challenges remain and will likely affect its efforts to combat the infection. The Covid-19 pandemic is set to severely impact South Africa's stagnant economy, will exacerbate the current inequalities and hit the vulnerable the hardest. Food shortages will fuel protests, resulting in increased clashes with police, leading to renewed cycles of violence and loss of life. However, given the country's past experience in dealing with infectious disease (e.g. tuberculosis and HIV), it is expected that South Africa has the ability to flatten the Covid-19 curve. How long it may take the country to recover from the socio-economic impact of the pandemic remains an open question.

Given these already existing inequalities, the lockdown is expected to take a heavy toll on the most vulnerable, posing a mounting challenge to the President Ramaphosa and his government.

High levels of crime and violence remain a threat to the efforts of South African authorities to mitigate the spread of Covid-19 in the country. Although widely mentioned as effective, South Africa's lockdown have been marred by instances of violence. At least [three people](#) have been reported killed by police, among other violent incidents. There has been riots and [lootings](#) of stores and related burglary attempts in several provinces of the country, leading the army to be deployed to confront the unrest. In the first week of the lockdown, the police said that it received [87000](#) gender-based violence complaints.

Additionally, vandalism of public and private properties has increased. Since the beginning of the lockdown on 27 March, over 180 educational institutions have been [damaged](#) (with some [burned](#) to ruins) and reports have mentioned a rise of [vandalism](#) on state-owned power company Eskom, leading to disruptions in an already under-supplied electricity market. Due to the increase of violence, it has been reported that security forces have imprisoned more than 148 people. The police have also arrested over 2,200 people throughout the country for contravening the lockdown regulations. The majority of cases have resulted from [protests](#) by poor communities who are facing food shortages and quickly-disappearing incomes for mostly-informal workers. Clashes between these communities and the police are likely to increase as South African authorities move to extend the current 4-week lockdown.

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