

Briefing on the spread, control and implications of COVID-19

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Tomorrow (6 May) the African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council (PSC) is expected to have a VTC briefing on the spread, control and implications of the novel coronavirus COVID-19 in Africa. It is expected that the Director of Africa Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC) John Nkengasong will give the main briefing.

It is to be recalled that during its 918th session dedicated to the impact of the pandemic on the peace and security of the continent the PSC has requested the Africa CDC to continue providing regular briefings on COVID19. Subsequently, the PSC also received a briefing on the humanitarian impact of COVID19 with a focus on the situation of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), refugees, asylum seekers and migrants from the Commissioner of Political Affairs.

In tomorrow's briefing, it is envisioned that Africa CDC will present an overview of the current situation across Africa including the spread of the virus, what the trend in the spread of the virus tells us and where Africa stands in terms of reaching the peak. Since the first confirmed case was reported in Egypt on 14 February, the spread of the virus over the course of March and April has covered all parts of the continent. The spread of the virus has skyrocketed by many folds.

According to the Africa CDC daily tracking of the spread of the virus, as at 5 May, 53 AU member states have reported 47,118 confirmed cases of COVID19 and 1843 deaths and 15,587 recoveries. Despite the fact that the continuing accelerated

rise in the spread of the virus, Africa CDC expresses concern that the number of confirmed cases does not tell us the full story. As Nkengasong pointed out to the medical publication Nature, 'the count is likely to be an underestimate; Ethiopia has run about 11,000 tests – only 10 for every 100,000 people'. During the press briefing late last week, he also noted that testing in Africa is very limited, noting that with 1.3 billion people the continent has so far tested less than 500,000 people, which is less than 500 per million.

All indications are that the real picture of the spread of the virus remains unknown. This means that it is not clear if the worst in the spread of the virus in Africa has already passed. Indeed, the expectation is that Africa has yet to reach the peak in the spread of the virus.

While underscoring the imperative for scaling up testing, it is expected that Nkengasong will inform the PSC the various factors hampering testing on the continent. He has already pointed out that 'lack of access to diagnostics is Africa's Achilles heel.' Despite the increase in the capacity of African countries to test, appropriate reagents for testing are not available on the market. The tragedy is that while African countries have the funds to pay for reagents, they cannot however buy them. This is not only on account of the disruption of the supply chains but also restrictions that countries adopted on the export of medical goods and the race by the powerful to acquire whatever COVID19 tests are available.

Moreover, in addition to diagnostics the briefing may also highlight the tools and resources needed for prevention and management of the pandemic including personal protective equipment (PPE), ventilators and other respiratory equipment.

It is expected that the briefing will also give update on ongoing efforts by the Centre in line with the implementation of the Africa Joint Continental Strategy for COVID19 Outbreak.

On 21 April, Africa CDC has launched the Partnership to Accelerate COVID19 Testing (PACT): Trace, Test & Track (CDC-T3), among other issues to support for the testing of one million Africans in 10 weeks, support for the deployment of one million community healthcare workers to support contact tracing and coordination of medical equipment distribution. As part of these ongoing efforts towards scaling up the continental testing capacity, the AU has established a COVID-19 Diagnostic Laboratory in the AU PANVAC in Bishoftu, Ethiopia. This initiative is also important in supporting and speeding up the production of test kits within Africa.

Given the nature of the pandemic, enhancing the coordination of response at national and Regional Economic Communities (RECs) level is critical for the effectiveness of the response. Particularly establishing continues information and data sharing as well as transparency will enable policy makers to identify patterns across countries and regions.

Also important for Africa is the effort for pulling resources together and source the necessary supplies for enhancing the capacity of the continent in fighting COVID19 at the level of the AU through Africa CDC. According to Nkengasong this would allow African countries to negotiate as one large customer, rather than as many small buyers fighting for a seat at the table.

On 29 April the Bureau of the Assembly held its third virtual meeting on the continental response on COVID19. The Bureau met with representatives of RECs. The discussion focused on the level of infection and on the spread at the regional level. The data from Africa CDC shows that Norther region with 17,700 cases is the region with the highest number of cases, followed by West Africa with 13,000 cases. The Bureau and representatives of RECs reiterated support to the efforts of Africa CDC particularly in relation to increasing testing capacity to ensure that in the next four months 10 million tests are undertaken through AU PACT initiative. Moreover, the

Heads of State and Government endorsed the call for debt cancellation and the development of relief packages.

The other point, which the PSC may also address, is around measures taken by government to contain the virus particularly around imposition of lockdowns and restriction of movement. In this regard the increased use of excessive force by security officers has been a concerning trend. In many cases the pandemic is being used as a pretext to enforce repression on individuals and communities. The PSC may urge member states to observe established human rights standards when applying measures to contain COVID19.

The Africa CDC, in line with the guidelines shared by the World Health Organization (WHO) has been continuously providing scientific and evidence based analysis and technical expertise to member states. However there has been an increased approach by certain member states, which are at times antithetical to the established scientific method. The PSC may utilize tomorrow's session to address this concerning trend. It may urge member states to strictly follow the guidelines developed by the WHO and Africa CDC when disseminating information on the prevention and management of the pandemic. Misguided and unscientific measures will put people in danger and worsen the level of infection. It is also important to note that given that COVID19 is a novel virus, the findings on the disease are still evolving.

While the expected outcome of the session is not known during the production of this 'Insight', it is expected to be a communique. The expectation is that the PSC will welcome the work of Africa CDC and express the importance of enhanced support for its work. The PSC could also underscore the importance and necessity of continental level investment not only for addressing COVID19 but also for dealing with future pandemics. The PSC could applaud the launch of the Partnership to Accelerate COVID19 Testing (PACT): Trace, Test & Track (CDC-T3) and urge that the efforts for scaling up testing are

speeded up. The PSC may also call on the international community to ensure that Africa has market access to diagnostics and to this end restrictions on the export of medical materials should be lifted to allow Africa to have the necessary inputs for rolling out and scaling up testing, which is critical in the effort to contain the virus. It may reiterate its support to governments for their efforts in fighting COVID19 and urge them to continue exercising maximum caution as some of them ease the restrictions imposed as part of the effort to contain the spread of the virus. The PSC may urge member states to ensure that their COVID19 responses including provision of public health information are in line with the global and continental guidelines established by the WHO and Africa CDC.