

From Morocco to Sudan, North Africa grapples with crippling new wave of COVID-19

Sat, 2021-07-31 19:39

DUBAI: First identified in India, the highly transmissible coronavirus delta variant has since been detected in around 100 countries, prompting new waves of infections, travel restrictions and concerns over the effectiveness of vaccines.

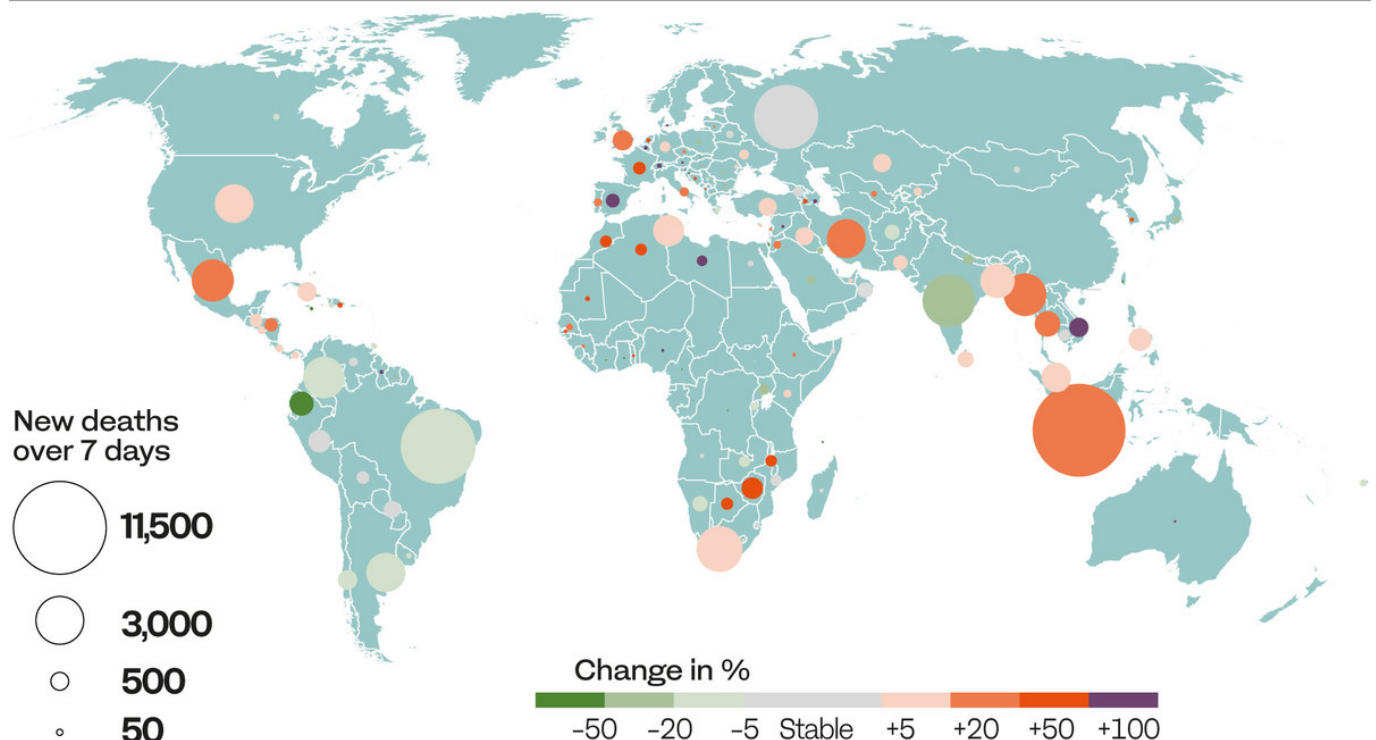
One region that has been especially hard hit is North Africa, where the economic havoc caused by lockdowns has forced governments to reluctantly reopen borders and businesses despite the slow pace of inoculation.

Tunisia, with a population of 11.69 million, has reported 582,638 infections and 19,336 deaths since the pandemic was declared in March 2020, making it one of the worst-hit nations in Africa, alongside Namibia, South Africa, Uganda and Zambia.

The collapse of the health system and severe economic hardship triggered mass protests that in turn have plunged the country into a political crisis.

COVID-19 DEATHS OVER ONE WEEK

Number of new deaths over 7 days compared to the previous week



Source: AFP tallies based on official tolls, as of July 29, 2021

ARAB NEWS

War-ravaged Libya has also witnessed an alarming surge of COVID-19 cases over

the past month. Because of its two centers of political power with parallel institutions, its response and vaccination rollout have been disjointed and sluggish.

The country's National Center for Disease Control (NCDC) recorded 3,845 new COVID-19 cases on July 25 – at that time the highest daily rate since the onset of the pandemic.

Libya has recorded roughly 246,200 cases and 3,469 deaths, but the true figure is likely far higher given the country's acute shortage of tests and laboratory capacity.

"We are alarmed at the rapid spread of the virus in the country," Abdulkadir Musse, UNICEF Special Representative in Libya, said in a statement.



A Moroccan municipal worker disinfects outside a house in a closed street in the southern port city of Safi on June 9, 2020 after Moroccan authorities declared a total lockdown. (AFP/File Photo)

"The vaccination rate is very low, and the spread is fast. We must be quicker in our response. The most important thing we can do to stop the spread of COVID-19 and the variants, is ensure everyone who is eligible gets vaccinated.

"Countries with high coverage of two doses of vaccines have been able to drastically reduce the rate of hospitalization and deaths. We also need to follow and abide by preventive measures."

Also known by its scientific name B.1.617.2, the delta variant was first detected in the Indian state of Maharashtra in October 2020, but was only labeled a “variant of concern” (VOC) by the World Health Organization (WHO) on May 11 this year.

The strain, itself the product of multiple mutations, is thought to be 60 percent more infectious than the alpha (or Kent) variant, an earlier mutation that emerged in southern England in November 2020.

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Arab countries of North Africa have particularly felt the economic pain of the coronavirus crisis. [Find out why here.](#)



In many countries, including the UK, delta has now become the dominant strain. Although it is thought to cause more severe symptoms than its ancestor variants, placing additional strain on health services, there is currently not enough data to suggest it is more deadly.

More encouraging is the data on the effectiveness of vaccines. A study by Public Health England found the Pfizer vaccine was 94 percent effective against hospitalization after one dose and 96 percent effective after two doses, while AstraZeneca was 71 percent effective after one dose and 92 percent effective after two.

This is all good for countries with high rates of vaccination such as the UK.

But for countries in the developing world, including the Arab states of North Africa, the slow rollout of vaccines means there is limited protection against the virus.

Delta is taking a terrible toll in these countries, leaving hospitals overburdened and mortuaries short of space.

Africa as a whole recently recorded a 43 percent week-on-week rise in COVID-19 deaths. Hospital admissions have increased rapidly and countries face shortages of oxygen and ICU beds.



A mask-clad worker measures the body temperature of incoming Muslim worshippers arriving for prayers at the Hasan II mosque, one of the largest in the African continent, in Morocco's Casablanca. (AFP/File Photo)

According to the WHO, the continent has vaccinated around 52 million people since the start of the rollout in March and only 18 million are fully vaccinated, representing 1.5 percent of the continent's population compared with more than 50 percent in some high-income countries.

South Africa, with its population of almost 60 million, has recorded 2,422,151 cases and 71,431 deaths since the pandemic began. Based on deaths per head of the population, Tunisia tops the region.

However, the picture is not uniform across the region. To date, 1.63 percent of Egyptians and 1.68 percent of Algerians have been fully vaccinated, compared with 27.68 percent of Moroccans, and 8.24 percent of Tunisians. Just 0.43 percent of Sudanese have received two doses, while data for Libya is

unavailable.

“Different countries have different epidemiological situations, so we can’t generalize all of North Africa,” Abdinasir Abubakar, head of the Infectious Hazard Management Unit at the WHO regional office in Cairo, told Arab News.

Some countries have “really invested so much in vaccination and this is paying off,” while other countries have focused on enforcing public-health measures to slow the spread of the virus, he said.

“I think Morocco has really made a great investment and progress on administering more people with the vaccine compared to a number of other countries. And the cases you see are actually very minimal compared to previous waves, so I wouldn’t worry much about Morocco,” Abubakar said.



People queue as they arrive outside a make-shift COVID-19 coronavirus vaccination and testing centre erected at the Martyrs’ Square of Libya’s capital Tripoli on July 24, 2021. (AFP)

Nevertheless, cases in Morocco have been steadily increasing since mid-May, prompting the government to announce an extension of its state of emergency until Aug. 10.

Having already inoculated older age groups, Moroccan health authorities are now offering vaccines to people over the age of 30. But compliance with social-distancing and other hygiene regulations appears to be slipping.

“In Casablanca, I saw many people wearing masks but without adhering to other physical and social-distancing measures,” said Um Ahmad, who recently

returned to Dubai following a family visit.

“I saw crowds on the streets and in markets as usual. And when I visited Fez, I saw people living normally with no precautionary actions whatsoever. I even asked my relative ‘are we on a different planet?’”



A Tunisian woman infected by the COVID-19 coronavirus receives oxygen at the Ibn al-Jazzar hospital in the east-central city of Kairouan. (AFP/File Photo)

In Algeria, which decided to close its borders to curb the spread of the delta variant, there is another more pressing problem – a shortage of oxygen in its hospitals to treat the seriously ill, forcing the government to establish a special unit to supervise the distribution of oxygen cylinders.

Egypt has reported a recent decline in the number of COVID-19 cases, with officials recording less than 70 new infections and less than 10 deaths per day. The country has even started sending its surplus medical kits to Tunisia.

But here too, public compliance with social-distancing measures leaves much to be desired. Eman Amir, an Egyptian working in Dubai who traveled to Cairo in May to visit her ailing mother, said she was shocked by the public’s relaxed attitude toward virus containment.

“Those who don’t care whether they die of coronavirus are those who feel they have little to lose given their already precarious existence,” she told Arab News, referring to contract and informal-sector workers most affected by pandemic restrictions.

In neighboring Sudan, cases are surging, particularly in the eastern city of Port Sudan, capital of the Red Sea State.



Abdinasir Abubakar, head of Infectious Hazard Management Unit, WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean. (Supplied)

Dr. Ahmed Dreyer, the state's director of the Emergency and Epidemic Control Department, has urged authorities to impose a three-week lockdown – known in policy circles as a circuit breaker – to help contain the spread of the delta variant.

Hana, a young Sudanese woman who lives with her family in Dubai, says many people back home are still not convinced the coronavirus even exists – the product, it would seem, of widespread misinformation.

“People have enough problems to worry about,” Hana said. “They don't want to add to them and worry about the pandemic.”

“They try to lead normal lives, by earning their livelihood and putting bread on the table.”

Twitter: [@jumanaaltamimi](https://twitter.com/jumanaaltamimi)



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Arab countries of North Africa feel coronavirus' economic pain

[**Egypt officials say Daesh militants**](#)

attack kills 5 troops in Sinai

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By ASHRAF SWEILAM | AP

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Sat, 2021-07-31 16:48

CAIRO: Daesh militants ambushed a checkpoint in the restive northern part of Egypt's Sinai Peninsula on Saturday, killing at least five troops from the security forces, officials said.

At least six other troops were wounded in the attack in the town of Sheikh Zuweid and taken to a military hospital in the Mediterranean city of El-Arish, they said.

Security personnel killed three militants in the firefight, and the area was reinforced, the officials added, speaking on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to brief the media.

Egypt has been battling militants in the northern part of Sinai Peninsula for years. Violence and instability there intensified after the 2013 military ouster of Muhammad Mursi, an elected but divisive Islamist president, amid nationwide protests against his brief rule.

The militants carried out numerous attacks, mainly targeting security forces, minority Christians and those who they accuse of collaborating with the military and police.

The pace of Daesh attacks in Sinai's main theater and elsewhere has slowed to a trickle since February 2018, when the military launched a massive operation in Sinai as well as parts of the Nile Delta and deserts along the country's western border with Libya.

The fight against militants in Sinai has largely taken place hidden from the public eye, with journalists, non-residents and outside observers barred from the area. The conflict has also been kept at a distance from tourist resorts at the southern end of the peninsula.



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Daesh Briton recruited dozens of fighters in London

[US official lands in Sudan to support democratic transition](#)

Author:

By SAMY MAGDY | AP

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1627744941692055600

Sat, 2021-07-31 14:43

CAIRO: The US official who wrote a Pulitzer Prize-winning book on genocide landed Saturday in Khartoum, aiming to support Sudan's fragile transition to democracy before traveling to Ethiopia to press the government there to allow humanitarian aid to the war-torn Tigray region.

Samantha Power, administrator of the US Agency for International Development, is set to meet with top Sudanese officials including Gen. Abdel-Fattah Burhan, head of the ruling sovereign council, and Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok, the civilian face of Sudan's transitional government.

She will also travel to Sudan's western region of Darfur where she said she investigated atrocities in the its civil war in the 2000s.

"I first visited Sudan in 2004— investigating a genocide in Darfur perpetrated by a regime whose grip on power seemed unshakeable. I couldn't imagine Sudan would one day be an inspiring example to the world that no leader is ever permanently immune from the will of their people," Power wrote on Twitter upon her arrival in Khartoum.

Power's visit to Khartoum is meant to "strengthen the US Government's partnership with Sudan's transitional leaders and citizens, explore how to expand USAID's support for Sudan's transition to a civilian-led democracy," USAID said.

Sudan is now on a fragile path to democracy and is ruled by a military-civilian government after a popular uprising led to the military's ouster of longtime autocrat Omar Al-Bashir in 2019. The Khartoum government, which seeks better ties with the US and the West after nearly three decades of international isolation, faces towering economic and security challenges that threaten to derail its transition into chaos.

The US official would also meet with Ethiopian refugees in Sudan who recently fled the conflict and atrocities in the Tigray region which borders Sudan. Since the Tigray war began in November, tens of thousands of Ethiopians have crossed into Sudan, adding to the country's economic and security challenges. Power's five-day trip will also take her to Ethiopia as part of international efforts to prevent a looming famine in Tigray, a region of some 6 million people that has been devastated by the months-long war.

Power will meet with Ethiopian officials "to press for unimpeded humanitarian access to prevent famine in Tigray and meet urgent needs in other conflict-affected regions of the country," USAID said.

The world's worst hunger crisis in a decade is unfolding in Tigray, where the US says up to 900,000 people now face famine conditions and international food security experts say the crucial planting season "has largely been missed" because of the war.

Ethiopia's government has blamed the aid blockade on the resurgent Tigray forces who have retaken much of the region and crossed into the neighboring Amhara and Afar regions, but a senior official with the US Agency for International Development this week told the AP that is "100 percent not the case."



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Sudan said to seek debt reduction from Gulf lenders

[HRW slams Iranian crackdown on Khuzestan protests](#)

Author:

Fri, 2021-07-30 21:57

LONDON: Human Rights Watch (HRW) on Friday condemned Iran's violent crackdown on protests in Khuzestan province.

Amnesty International and UN Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet have also expressed condemnation in the past week.

HRW reported hundreds arrested and at least nine deaths, including a child. "Unconfirmed reports indicate the number of deaths and arrests may be

higher," it added.

On July 15, massive protests broke out in Khuzestan over water shortages, spearheaded by the province's Arab community demonstrating against government negligence and anti-Arab discrimination.

Iranians in several other provinces have joined in solidarity. Iranian officials have blamed "rioters" for the killing of protesters.

But HRW said: "Videos shared on social media from protests in cities in Khuzestan show security officials shooting firearms and teargas toward protesters."

Karim Dahimi, a London-based Ahwazi human rights activist, told Arab News that the death toll could go higher since many protesters "haven't gone hospital for fear of being arrested and returned home with heavy injuries."

He said Iranian authorities have set conditions for the return of victims' bodies to families, including "protesters' mobile number, information on who they were in contact with, who was with them, and who informed the parents."

Another condition is that the fathers of victims go on camera and claim that "the protesters killed my son, and my son had no involvement in the demonstrations," Dahimi added.

"Some families are under pressure and want to take the bodies, so they've accepted the government's conditions. Other families haven't."

Eight of the protesters killed are Ahwazi Arabs and the ninth is Bakhtiari, Dahimi said. The crackdown on the mass protests is disproportionately impacting Iran's Arab minority.

Shadi Sadr, a lawyer and co-founder of London-based NGO Justice for Iran, tweeted that the hundreds of protesters and activists arrested are "mostly of Arab Ahwazi ethnicity." They have been arrested "in their homes and workplaces," he added.

HRW said Iranian authorities "should immediately and unconditionally release peaceful protesters, provide information about deaths, and allow an independent international investigation into security agencies' alleged use of lethal force. All those responsible for abuses should be held to account."



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One killed in Iran water shortage protests: state media

[Foreign fighters in Libya must be held accountable for rights abuses, say UN experts](#)

Fri, 2021-07-30 21:07

NEW YORK: Human rights abuses committed by foreign mercenaries and private contractors in Libya must be investigated and the perpetrators held accountable, UN experts said on Friday.

The departure of foreign fighters from the country is a “vital precondition” for the peaceful staging of elections scheduled for December, they added.

The UN estimates there are more than 20,000 foreign fighters seeking to profit from the conflict in Libya, the majority of them from Syria, Turkey, Chad and Sudan.

The members of the UN Security Council have agreed that they must be repatriated. However two of the council's permanent members, the US and UK, accuse another, Russia, of being responsible for some of the foreign fighters. In particular they point to the Wagner Group, a Kremlin-backed private-security firm that UN experts say is involved in the fighting in Libya.

Moscow has repeatedly denied any role on the country's battlefields. Jelena Aparac, chair of the UN working group on the use of mercenaries, said that well-armed private contractors from Russia, Syria, Sudan and Chad threaten the security and stability not only of Libya but also other countries in the region.

"Nine months after the ceasefire agreement calling for withdrawal of foreign forces and mercenaries from Libya, mercenaries and private military and security contractors continue to operate in the country," she said.

"Their continued recruitment and presence in Libya impedes progress in the peace process and constitutes an obstacle for the upcoming elections."

The working group's experts said these mercenaries must leave the country immediately and "there must be an immediate end to the transfer of military weapons and materiel into Libya."

Aparac appealed to the international community "to take concrete steps" to move the repatriation process forward.

During the UN-facilitated Libyan Political Dialogue Forum, representatives of both sides in the conflict agreed a road map to "credible, inclusive and democratic national elections" that are due to take place on Dec. 24 this year.

If foreign fighters remain in the country at that time, Libyans will not be able to vote in a safe and secure environment, Aparac warned.

Her working group concluded more than a year ago that a reliance on mercenaries since 2019 contributed to the escalation of the conflict in Libya, undermined the peace process, and constituted a breach of the Security Council's arms embargo on the country. Since then, the experts have repeatedly urged governments to investigate all allegations of violations of human rights and humanitarian law.

"A year on, and looking forward to elections, we remain concerned that any political process aiming to establish sustainable peace has to include a genuine commitment to human rights," the experts said on Friday.

"There must be real accountability for abuses committed by mercenaries, mercenary-related actors, and private contractors."

Working groups and special rapporteurs are part of what is known as the special procedures of the UN Human Rights Council. They are independent experts and work on a voluntary basis. They are not members of UN staff and are not paid for their work.



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