

# PERC Weekly Update: COVID-19 Epidemiology and Policy in Africa

Reporting period: 15-21 February 2021 (Africa CDC Epi Week 7)

## KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- Almost a year since the pandemic started, African Union (AU) Member States are dealing with the COVID-19's direct and indirect effects. **South Sudan** and **Somalia**, in particular, are battling rising COVID-19 cases in addition to major security incidents. Similarly, while **DRC** and **Guinea** respond to Ebola outbreaks, they are also experiencing increases in COVID-19 cases.
- As Africa reached a grim [milestone](#) this week—surpassing 100,000 deaths from COVID-19—there have been growing [reports](#) that this number is likely a major underestimation.
- In a major change in messaging, the president of **Tanzania** is [acknowledging](#) for the first time that the recent rise in reported pneumonia cases and deaths there may be due to COVID-19. Still, **Tanzania** has no plans for vaccination rollouts and has yet to report a new case since May 2020.

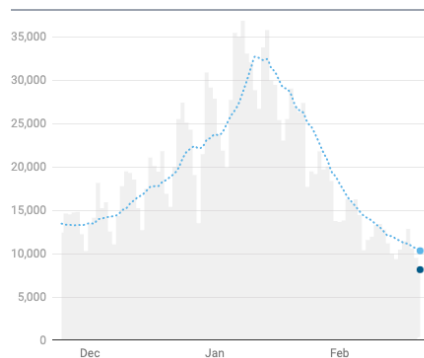
## DISEASE DYNAMICS ([Reference](#): Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention Outbreak Brief)

### Total Daily New Cases

7-day average

**10,335**

-14.0% week-over-week change

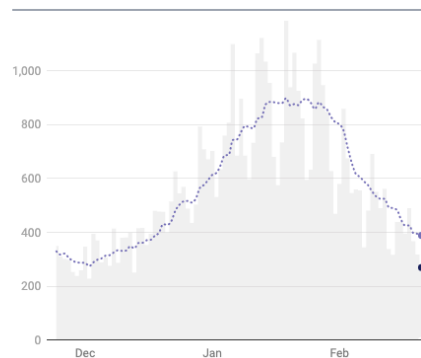


### Total Daily New Deaths

7-day average

**389**

-20.7% week-over-week change



### Total Daily New Tests Conducted

7-day average

**103,082**

-14.8% week-over-week change

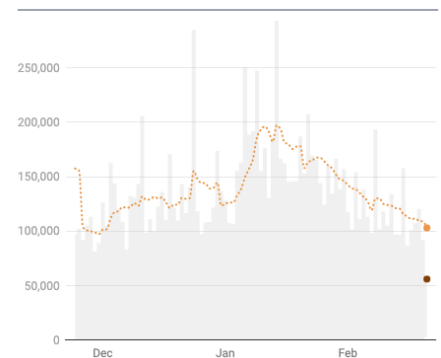


Figure 1. Africa CDC epidemiological data on PERC hotspot [dashboard](#)

- Across Africa, the total numbers of reported new cases and deaths decreased by 14% and 20%, respectively, between Epi week 7 (15-21 February) and Epi week 6 (8-14 February). Still, the continent reached a grim milestone—surpassing 100,000 reported deaths.
- Multiple recent reports highlight how the lack of COVID-19 data across Africa has misrepresented the extent of the virus's reach. A [study](#) in **Zambia** found that 1 in 5 newly-deceased people in a Lusaka morgue (which accounts for 80% of deaths in the community) tested positive for COVID-19, indicating that mortality surveillance may be underestimating the severity of the epidemic. Another [study](#) from **Sudan** estimated that approximately 2% of total COVID-19 deaths had been counted in Khartoum.
- Reported new COVID-19 cases increased in 21 AU Member States, the majority of which are in the Central and Eastern regions. The test positivity rate remains above the 5% rate recommended by the Africa CDC in the majority of AU Member States, suggesting that many cases are going undetected.
- In **Somalia** and **South Sudan**, reported new cases have increased rapidly since early February and the 7-day averages of new cases are the highest yet reported.
  - In **Somalia**, where a prominent religious scholar [died](#) from COVID-19, there are [reports](#) that hospitals in Mogadishu have run out of oxygen. Ongoing conflict over delayed elections [intensified](#) between the

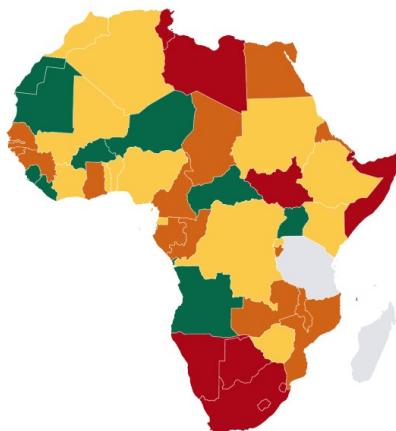
For more information on the disease situation, PHSM implementation and adherence in Africa, as well as PERC survey findings, please visit the PERC [website](#).

current administration and the opposition party in recent weeks. There were reports of gunfire in Mogadishu, which is currently in lockdown due to rising COVID-19 cases.

- In **South Sudan**, where 27 members of the president’s staff [tested](#) positive for the virus, the test positivity rate is 22%. The [UN Human Rights Council](#) reported the conflict situation is the “worst recorded” since the civil war began in December 2013. And, according to the [World Food Program](#), the number of people in need of humanitarian assistance has increased by 10% since 2020 (up to 70% of their population).
- **DRC**, which declared an Ebola outbreak on 7 February, sustained a 20% increase in new reported cases and reported a very high test positivity rate of 31%. **Guinea**, which also [declared](#) an Ebola outbreak on 14 February and is tackling measles and yellow fever outbreaks, reported a 105% increase in COVID-19 cases with a test positivity rate of 9%.
- Reported new cases decreased by 20% in the Southern region; however, cases increased by 56% in **Namibia** where the test positivity rate is above 15%.
- On 21 February, **Tanzania’s** president appeared to [acknowledge](#) that COVID-19 was a problem and called on people to wear face masks, although the AU Member State has not reported any new cases since April 2020. The president’s statement came after WHO [called](#) on **Tanzania** to start reporting COVID-19 cases, implement public health measures and prepare for vaccinations.
  - In [news](#) and on social media, there have been growing reports in recent weeks of increased deaths from respiratory illnesses in **Tanzania**. On 17 February, it was [reported](#) that the vice president of Zanzibar died at a hospital in Dar es Salaam, from what is [suspected](#) to be COVID-19 (although his cause of death was not officially announced).
  - In February alone, there were 293 posts mentioning pneumonia on social media in **Tanzania**. One Twitter user commented, “My timeline and groups are inundated with obituaries, deaths caused by ‘severe pneumonia’”.

### Hotspot Warning Levels

<b>Warning Level 0: Gray</b> No data available.	<b>Warning Level 1: Green</b> Relatively low spread and no evidence of a growing outbreak.	<b>Warning Level 2: Yellow</b> A moderate outbreak or the possible start of a growing outbreak.	<b>Warning Level 3: Orange</b> A widespread or growing outbreak.	<b>Warning Level 4: Red</b> A very widespread or fast-growing outbreak.
--	---	--	---	--



**Figure 2.** Map of AU Member States by hotspot level on PERC [dashboard](#). This system is intended to highlight AU Member States in need of attention due to an increasing or widespread outbreak. For specifics on calculations, refer to the dashboard [methodology](#). The delineation of the international and other boundaries used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the AU and Africa CDC. The validity of the hotspot warning levels is dependent on the data quality, reporting frequency and testing strategy being implemented within specific Member States. Interpret cautiously for countries with low testing rates.

The following Member States have [reported](#) presence of the 501Y.V2 variant (B.1.351): **Botswana, Comoros, DRC, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, South Africa, The Gambia and Zambia**. Note, at present, global genomic surveillance is limited.

## PUBLIC HEALTH AND SOCIAL MEASURE (PHSM) HIGHLIGHTS

For more information on the disease situation, PHSM implementation and adherence in Africa, as well as PERC survey findings, please visit the PERC [website](#).

The table below highlights changes in PHSMs by PERC hotspot warning level based on data from the [Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker](#). An up arrow indicates new PHSMs announced. Horizontal arrow indicates PHSMs extended. Down arrow indicates PHSMs loosened/expired.

Country	PHSM Trend	PHSM Change
<b>Warning Level 4: Red</b> A very widespread or fast-growing outbreak.		
Cabo Verde	↑	The Council of Ministers in <b>Cabo Verde</b> <a href="#">announced</a> that Carnival celebrations would not be permitted to take place this year due to high COVID-19 transmission. Authorities also <a href="#">extended</a> income support measures as a result of the ongoing restrictions.
Eswatini	→	In lieu of resuming in-person learning, the government of <b>Eswatini</b> <a href="#">announced</a> that it will air pre-recorded lessons on public radio until lockdown measures are lifted and schools reopen.
Lesotho	↓	<b>Lesotho</b> <a href="#">downgraded</a> the country's risk level from red to orange on 3 February. As a result, some restrictions were eased, including capacity limits on funerals, and the nationwide curfew was shortened by an hour.
Libya	↓	More than half of <b>Libya's</b> schools <a href="#">reopened</a> on 15 February with some preventative measures in place.
São Tomé and Príncipe	→	<b>São Tomé and Príncipe</b> <a href="#">extended</a> a state of calamity until 2 March, maintaining restrictions including suspension of religious services and restricted travel between the islands.
Somalia	↑	All schools are <a href="#">closed</a> in <b>Somalia</b> for a period of at least two weeks.
South Africa	→	<b>South Africa</b> <a href="#">reopened</a> land borders and <a href="#">resumed</a> in-person learning; however, it also <a href="#">extended</a> a nationwide state of disaster until 15 March, and maintained measures such as the nightly curfew.
Tunisia	→	<b>Tunisia</b> <a href="#">extended</a> partial lockdown measures until 7 March amidst surges in new cases. This includes maintenance of a nightly curfew and a ban on public gatherings.
<b>Warning Level 3: Orange</b> A widespread or growing outbreak.		
Chad	→	<b>Chad</b> <a href="#">extended</a> the existing nighttime curfew in N'Djamena and the surrounding area until 24 February.
Congo Republic	→	In <b>Congo Republic</b> , authorities have <a href="#">maintained</a> a nightly curfew in Brazzaville and Pointe-Noire, where the majority of cases continue to be concentrated. Additionally, the state of health emergency has been extended until 6 March.
Gabon	↑	<b>Gabon</b> <a href="#">restricted</a> movement into and out of capital city Libreville and lengthened a nighttime curfew by two hours, beginning at 18:00 until 5:00.

Ghana	↑	<b>Ghana</b> <a href="#">suspended</a> the convening of its Parliament for three weeks after 17 members and 151 staffers contracted COVID-19.
Malawi	↓	<b>Malawi</b> <a href="#">announced</a> that schools will reopen on 22 February following a decline in new cases. Some schools will require students to produce a negative COVID-19 test, so the Ministry of Health has taken steps to improve access by <a href="#">increasing</a> testing sites.
Senegal	↑	Health authorities in <b>Senegal</b> have <a href="#">launched</a> a mass disinfection campaign of schools, markets, public buildings and religious institutions in capital city Dakar.
<b>Warning Level 2: Yellow</b> A moderate outbreak or the possible start of a growing outbreak.		
Algeria	↓	<b>Algeria</b> <a href="#">reopened</a> all mosques, lifted restrictions on restaurants and cafes, and reopened hotels. A nightly curfew was renewed for 15 days in 19 out of 48 provinces.
Equatorial Guinea	↑	<b>Equatorial Guinea</b> <a href="#">imposed</a> a nighttime curfew, closures of bars, restaurants, and other “leisure sites,” and limits on flights.
Ethiopia	↑	<b>Ethiopia</b> <a href="#">launched</a> the “No Mask, No Service,” campaign in schools across the country to encourage students to wear face masks and reduce the spread of COVID-19.
Mali	↑	In <b>Mali</b> , most of the events, including concerts and fairs, that typically mark Festival Sur Le Niger, one of the nation’s largest celebrations, <a href="#">were cancelled</a> to prevent COVID-19 transmission.
Morocco	→	<b>Morocco</b> <a href="#">announced</a> that it will provide economic relief to workers of traditional hammams that were forced to close in March 2020 due to COVID-19 lockdown restrictions. Authorities have also <a href="#">extended</a> a state of emergency and maintained a nightly curfew for two more weeks.
Nigeria	↑	In <b>Nigeria</b> , authorities <a href="#">imposed</a> an indefinite nightly curfew in Anambra State from 21:00-6:00.
Rwanda	↓	<b>Rwanda</b> <a href="#">eased</a> lockdown measures in capital city Kigali, shortening the nightly curfew to 19:00-4:00. Public employees will continue to work from home until 22 February, and bars, and restaurants will remain closed. Schools will <a href="#">reopen</a> on 23 February.
Zimbabwe	→	<b>Zimbabwe</b> <a href="#">extended</a> national lockdown measures for two weeks, meaning schools will remain closed and public gatherings continue to be prohibited.
<b>Warning Level 1: Green</b> Relatively low spread and no evidence of a growing outbreak.		
Angola	↓	In <b>Angola</b> , primary schools officially <a href="#">reopened</a> after an 11-month closure. New measures are in place to protect staff and students, including mandatory hand washing before entering classrooms, mask wearing, and physical distancing. Authorities in <b>Angola</b> also <a href="#">extended</a> the state of public calamity until 11 March.
Sierra Leone	↓	<b>Sierra Leone</b> <a href="#">lifted</a> lockdown measures in Freetown. A nightly curfew from 22:00-5:00 and mandatory wearing of face masks in public remain in effect.

## SECONDARY BURDENS OF COVID-19 AND PHSMS

For more information on the disease situation, PHSM implementation and adherence in Africa, as well as PERC survey findings, please visit the PERC [website](#).

### *Ebola outbreak*

- On 14 February, the Ministry of Health of **Guinea** [announced](#) a cluster of Ebola cases in Gouéké, a rural community close to the **Liberia** and **Côte d'Ivoire** border. The week before, an unrelated Ebola outbreak was [declared](#) in **DRC**. WHO released US\$ 1.25 million to support the response in Guinea and to reinforce Ebola readiness in neighbouring AU Member States and Africa CDC is [deploying](#) response staff to the region. Health systems are already [stretched](#) thin, with both Guinea and DRC battling COVID-19 and measles outbreaks, though Ebola vaccines are being [sent](#) to both AU Member States.

### *Security incidents*

- The Italian Ambassador to **DRC**, along with two other people, were [killed](#) in a convoy attack near Goma. The circumstances around the attack are unclear, however, it may negatively affect government and international organizations ability to respond to the multiple disease outbreaks (Ebola, COVID-19, Measles) **DRC** is experiencing currently.
- **Central African Republic** is [experiencing ongoing instability](#) with almost one-third of the population displaced from their homes. The latest conflict is due to the elections in December which led to 200,000 recently displaced, with the capital now under siege. Rebels are now controlling entry routes and supply deliveries are being blocked. While the hotspot analysis (in Figure 1, above) shows **Central African Republic** as a level 1, it is important to take movement restraints and limited access to health services into account when interpreting the country's COVID-19 epidemiology.

### *PHSM enforcement and protests*

- Government leaders in **Nigeria** have [started](#) to hand out 2,000 naira (US\$ 5) fines to people found violating the face mask mandate and physical distancing measures. One day, a reported 46 people were tried at an outdoor court in Abuja. In January, the president signed into law that people violating COVID-19 measures could face up to six months in jail.
- In **South Africa**, the government [announced](#) that travelers entering their borders using fake negative COVID-19 test results would be denied entry and receive a five-year ban from crossing the border. Social media users in **Zimbabwe** reacted negatively to the announcement, noting that getting tested was costly and cumbersome.
- Protests against the latest COVID-19 restrictions have been ongoing in **Gabon** since 13 February, with reports of violent clashes with police. Social media users expressed frustration following a [report](#) that two protestors were shot and killed by police.

## **NEWS AND SOCIAL MEDIA**

- Top hashtags associated with the vaccines, new variants, and COVID-19 in Africa in February included #RaisingTheBar and #WeChooseVaccinations. #RaisingTheBar emerged at the beginning of February, prominently being used by social media users in **Kenya**. Between 1-18 February, the hashtag was used 6.93K times. Users of the hashtags commonly encourage their peers to wash their hands, wear a face mask, and physically distance. #WeChooseVaccinations was posted 8.57K times in the same timeframe.
- While misinformation narratives were less common, the following narratives gained traction in news and on social media:
  - In **Ghana**, some government officials are encouraging people to consume more chocolate as a means to prevent COVID-19. Between February 1 and February 18, “chocolate” and “cocoa” were mentioned a total of 350 times in COVID-19 Twitter coverage geolocated to **Ghana**.
  - On social media in **Malawi**, reports circulated of “a new way of treating” COVID-19 patients by using a “water treatment.”
  - In early February, government officials in **Tanzania** launched a campaign to [encourage](#) steam therapy to fight the virus, despite having no evidence to support the approach. On social media, some users warned that the steam rooms were likely spreading the virus, rather than preventing it.



## VACCINE UPDATE

### *Distribution*

- Vaccination continues to be [distributed](#) unequally around the globe; more than 75% of vaccine administration has been concentrated in 10 of the world's wealthiest countries, while healthcare workers in Africa [remain largely unprotected](#). A total of nine AU Member States have started to roll out vaccines in Africa, including **Algeria**, **Egypt**, **Guinea**, **Mauritius**, **Morocco**, **Seychelles**, and most recently, **South Africa**, **Rwanda** and **Zimbabwe**.
- As of 23 February, 37 AU Member States submitted National Deployment and Vaccination Plans (NDVPs) and 16 AU Member States completed purchase orders for the first wave of vaccine shipments. **Ghana**, **Cote d'Ivoire** and **Uganda** will be among the first AU Member States to receive a vaccine via COVAX in the coming weeks.
  - Of the 10 AU Member States that did not submit a NDVP, five are self-financing so are not required to submit an NDVP. The other five are **Burundi**, **Central African Republic**, **Eritrea**, **Tanzania**, and **Madagascar** (**Central African Republic** asked for extension until end of February).
- Next week, the AU will [distribute](#) 1 million AstraZeneca vaccine doses to 20 Member States. **South Africa** offered to [donate](#) its AstraZeneca vaccine to the AU for continent-wide distribution after suspending its rollout due to concerns over efficacy against the 501.V2 variant. Other AU Member States, including **Malawi** and **Botswana**, confirmed they will continue to use the AstraZeneca vaccine as planned.
- The Chinese Sinopharm vaccine has begun rollout across the continent: **Equatorial Guinea** [received](#) a donation of 100,000 doses; **Zimbabwe** [received](#) 200,000 doses and has started administering to health workers; **Algeria** [is set to receive](#) 200,000 doses; **Senegal** [purchased](#) 200,000 doses, with rollout anticipated soon.

### *Regulatory approvals*

- WHO [granted](#) an emergency use listing for two versions of the AstraZeneca vaccine. With this approval, the COVAX facility is expected to begin delivery at the end of February. Johnson & Johnson [submitted data](#) on 19 February to WHO to be considered for an emergency use listing.
- **Nigerian** regulatory authorities [approved](#) the AstraZeneca vaccine for emergency use and expect the first doses to arrive in February. Private companies in **Nigeria** [formed a coalition](#) to raise more than USD\$100 million to purchase 42 million doses for the AU Member State.

### *Foreign aid/assistance*

- France's **Emmanuel Macron** and the United Kingdom's **Boris Johnson** pledged to donate excess vaccine to lower income nations and urged others to follow suit. President Biden [committed](#) to donating \$4 billion to the COVAX facility to support global vaccine equity, while the EU has [announced](#) it will double its contribution to \$1.2 billion. The U.S. biotech company Novavax also [announced](#) it will sell 1.1 billion doses of its vaccine to COVAX once approved.
- Russia [offered to donate](#) 300 million doses of their Sputnik V vaccine to the AU, with expected delivery in May.
- The World Bank [approved](#) support to **Cabo Verde** to procure and distribute enough vaccine to cover 35% of the nation's population.

### *Clinical trials/research*

- A new lab-based [study](#) of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine suggested that its neutralization power might be reduced by up to two-thirds against the 501.V2 variant; however, the real-world implications of these findings are still unclear. Researchers said that despite a potential decrease in antibody neutralization, the vaccine was still likely to effectively protect against COVID-19 caused by the variant. Scientists in **South Africa** are determining how this new study affects their vaccination plans, with 100,000 doses of the Pfizer vaccine [expected in the first quarter](#), and 20 million in total. Two top government advisors have [publicly backed](#) the vaccine, arguing that despite some reduction in neutralization, the remaining neutralization potency will be sufficient to provide protection.