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By Stephan McCoy
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South Africa: State of national disaster declared as coronavirus hits and social tensions mount

South Africa has become the latest country to see a sharp rise in confirmed cases of COVID-19, making it the hardest hit on the African continent.

On Thursday, Health Minister Zweli Mkhize told the South African Medical Association (SAMA) that the spread of the coronavirus was only just beginning and that between “60 percent and 70 percent” of the population were likely to be infected.

His estimates echo those of the World Health Organisation (WHO).

On March 15, in a national address, President Cyril Ramaphosa announced that the number of confirmed cases of coronavirus had reached 61—a development which came as shock to many. By yesterday, the figure was 202, including 52 new cases in a single day. At least eight cases recorded by March 18 had no previous travel history.

The African National Congress (ANC) government’s response to the pandemic has been lacklustre and incompetent—spending weeks doing nothing to prepare for the inevitable arrival of the virus. Despite declaring a national state of disaster, the measures Ramaphosa outlined were paltry and do not take into account the kind of action that organizations such as the WHO and other experts have said are needed to stem the spread of the virus.

The address made no mention of plans for extensive testing and contact tracing—the two key measures required to halt the spread of the virus. Ramaphosa largely outlined such things as social distancing. Certain land, air and seaports were also to be closed, and a half-hearted approach to school closures was taken—with primary and secondary schools closed while universities were not addressed—leaving them to decide when to close. Most

did so haphazardly, cancelling graduations and angering many students. The secondary and primary school closures came only after it was reported widely that a Grade 9 student had tested positive for coronavirus.

The government has now announced that it will focus on closing borders, including building a 40-kilometre fence along the border with Zimbabwe to stem undocumented migration, having already closed 35 of 53 land entry points. Zimbabwe has not yet reported cases of coronavirus.

The crisis has fuelled hostility towards the government. Many workers and young people took to social media to voice their anger at this incompetence and indifference, both before and after the address. Some protested being forced to go to work as the virus spreads, noting that the taxi ranks on which many rely were overcrowded and unsanitary.

Health workers took to social media to denounce the government for not doing enough to ensure their safety or to deal with the lack of much needed supplies, such as gloves and masks—exacerbated by thefts from hospitals.

A *Science Magazine* article titled “A ticking time bomb”, cited scientists’ concerns about coronavirus spread in Africa. The article notes that with the populations of many African countries “disproportionately affected by HIV, tuberculosis (TB), and other infectious diseases” and with most having “weak health care systems... experts worry the virus [will] ravage” the continent. Additionally, “[s]ocial distancing” will be hard to do in the continent’s overcrowded cities and slums.”

The BBC reported on the situation in the informal settlements in Alexandra on the outskirts of Johannesburg, where people often live in cramped single rooms and share communal outdoor toilets. Electrician Nicholas Mashabele warned, “If the virus comes here, it’s going to kill everyone... We don’t have money to buy hygiene [products] to protect ourselves. We’re living in high risk.”

His wife, Shebi Mapiane, pointed to the wall of her house, saying, “My neighbour is just here. If I catch it, he’ll catch it, and everyone will catch it.”

Dr. Alison Glass, a clinical biologist, commented, “My biggest worry is... if this spills over into poorer communities where it’s more difficult to identify patients and to contain [the virus].”

South Africa has the highest number of people living with HIV of any country on Earth, a direct result of the ANC’s and former leader Thabo Mbeki’s criminal irresponsibility at

the outset of the HIV epidemic. There are 2.5 million people living with HIV who are not on antiretrovirals, the drug used to fight the onset of Acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS).

In those living with HIV, Professor Salim Abdool Karim, warns, “[W]e’re likely to see more severe infections.” Those with AIDS, which brings with it pneumonia and recurring respiratory tract infections, face even graver danger.

South Africa is riven by social inequality. The official unemployment rate stands at 26.7 percent—6.7 million workers—youth unemployment is 57 percent, the highest in the world, and the rate of HIV infection is 15 percent, meaning the threat of this virus devastating the population is all too real.

One only need recall Mbeki’s downplaying of the HIV epidemic to know what the attitude of the South African ruling elite will be. As the situation spiralled and HIV became the single biggest cause of death in South Africa, Mbeki cynically claimed that the reports of alarming number of deaths from HIV was a conspiracy by the World Health Organisation and others to attack his government. At one point he stated, “Whatever the intensity of the hostile propaganda that might be provoked by the WHO statistics, we cannot allow that government policy and programmes should be informed by misperceptions, however widespread and well-established they may seem to be.”

It was Thabo Mbeki who fallaciously used statistics from a much earlier period, with much smaller figures, to downplay the HIV epidemic. One can already see in Ramaphosa’s response to the coronavirus pandemic a similar negligence, denial and cynicism.

On the other hand, with the coronavirus only beginning to take hold, Ramaphosa is already making pledges to business and the corporations to implement “bailout packages” like those offered by his counterparts around the world. While workers are forced to keep going to work in unsafe conditions and risk exposing themselves and their loved ones to the virus, the profits of the bourgeoisie are treated with care and delicacy. Surely no harm must come to them.

As *Times Live* reports, Ramaphosa told various political parties, “All social partners, specifically government, business and labour, need to jointly develop and implement measures to mitigate the economic impact of Covid-19. Companies in distress need to be helped.”

This means business will be given billions to shore up profits, while the trade unions work to repress mounting opposition, as the police and military are readied for any serious resistance by the working class.

In recent comments, WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus scolded African governments, saying, “Africa should wake up, my continent should wake up.” As far as the fate of the working class is concerned, the African ruling elite will not heed this call.

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