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Why does the world punish Africa instead of helping it?



Sources: Orient Monitor

The decision by several governments around the world to impose travel bans on seven African countries, starting on November 27, due to the discovery of a new variant of Covid-19, Omicron, was perceived as hasty in the eyes of some and fully justifiable on medical grounds, in the opinion of others. However, this is not a difference of opinion.

The speed with which some of Africa's poorest countries, such as Botswana, Lesotho and Zimbabwe, have been suffocated is particularly disturbing if placed in an appropriate context on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the Global South in general and Africa in particular.

"I've decided we're going to be cautious," U.S. President Joe Biden told reporters on Nov. 26, explaining the new travel restrictions imposed by Washington. "We don't know much about the variant, except that it's a big concern, it seems to spread quickly."

Although posed in polite and diplomatic terms, the justification of the mostly Western governments to prevent the entry of citizens of these seven African countries is reminiscent of the January 2017 decision of former US President Donald Trump to prevent the entry into the United States of citizens of seven Muslim-majority countries – three of them African – based on the flimsy logic and, of course, openly racist, that with it the United States could fix its problems.

At the time, Trump called for "a total and complete shutdown of muslim entry into the United States until our country's representatives can figure out what's going on."

The South African Foreign Ministry immediately lashed out at the unfounded decision to isolate the country before even knowing the nature of the new variant. In fact, at that time, and until the writing of this article, not a single death has been directly related to Omicron. Compare it to the Delta variant, which was first discovered in India and spread rapidly in the UK, generating many deaths and devastation, but without forcing immediate decisions to isolate Delta-infected countries.

"Excellent science should be applauded and not punished," South Africa's Foreign Ministry said in a statement, adding that the travel bans were "akin to punishing South Africa for its advanced genomic sequencing and ability to detect new variants more quickly."

Speaking to the BBC, senior African Union official Ayoade Alakija rightly claimed that the spread of the new variant is the direct consequence of the deep inequality that has characterized the fight against the pandemic since its inception.

"What is happening now is [...] the result of the world's inability to vaccinate equitably, urgently and quickly. It's the result of [vaccine] hoarding by the world's high-income countries and, frankly, it's unacceptable," Alakija said, adding that "these travel bans are based on politics and not science."

Indeed, aid to Africa in its critical fight against the pandemic should have been done more systematically as part of an inclusive global strategy. Unfortunately, little of that has happened. From the beginning, rich countries such as the United States, European states, China, and Japan have provided financial packages to keep their economies afloat. At times, they provided direct financial aid to all their citizens to compensate for rising unemployment and prolonged shutdowns. Africa, because of pre-existing global inequality and widespread poverty, could not afford such luxuries. Worse, African countries were the last to receive the life-saving vaccines.

Instead, access to vaccines in Africa was perceived as a form of charity, relegated to a debate concerning the goodness and goodwill of rich Western countries. Disappointingly, the main measure to counter the deep inequalities, which put Africa at its current economic disadvantage in the first place, was represented by the COVAX programme, sponsored by the Coalition for Innovations in Epidemic Preparedness (CEPI), the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Vaccine Alliance (GAVI), among other charities.

COVAX, which launched in April 2020, was triumphantly described as an effective platform "to accelerate the development and manufacture of COVID-19 vaccines, and ensure fair and equitable access for all countries."

Twenty months later, it can be seen effortlessly that COVAX failed in its mission to provide poor and developing countries with protection against the pandemic. This is not a judgment on the structure, conduct or sincerity of COVAX, but an indictment of those who insist that the same rules of economic and social exploitation can be applied to a deadly pandemic that does not distinguish between race, nationality or class.

"While richer countries roll out booster shots, 98% of people in low-income countries remain unvaccinated. Covax [...] has contributed only 5% of all vaccines administered

globally and recently announced that it would not reach its target of 2 billion by 2021," Rosa Furneaux and Olivia Goldhill wrote in a recent paper published in Quartz.

According to data published by Reuters, in Lesotho – one of the African countries targeted by the new travel bans – only 14.5% of the total population is fully vaccinated. Zimbabwe and Botswana are only a few steps ahead, with percentages of 22.6 and 29.4 respectively, still quite far from the target herd immunity threshold that was initially estimated at around 60-70% of the population.

It has been almost two years since the Covid pandemic broke out and yet the world insists on facing a global crisis with nationalist and political solutions. The fact that we continue to fight the virus and its variants indicates that traditional thinking has completely failed. For the pandemic to finally be defeated, we have to abandon the mentality of rich versus poor and north versus south. For the world to be saved, we all have to save ourselves collectively.

Source: <https://www.monitordeoriente.com/20211210-la-verguenza-de-omicron-por-que-el-mundo-castiga-a-africa-en-lugar-de-ayudarla/>

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