

African medics struggle in virus 'war zone'

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African medics struggle in virus 'war zone' Rising infections, shortages of protective equipment and growing strains are some of the issues faced by health workers in Africa as they battle the coronavirus. FILE: A laboratory specialist wearing protective gear outside the Infectious Disease Unit of Kenyatta National Hospital in Nairobi, Kenya, on 15 March 2020. Picture: AFP AFP | 17 minutes ago LAGOS - Health workers toiling on the frontline across Africa say they are facing rising infections, shortages of protective equipment and growing strains as they battle the coronavirus. Here is a look at the key countries: SOUTH AFRICA South Africa's health ministry says more than 2,000 practitioners have contracted the virus and at least 17 have died from it. Around 80% of the infections have been in Western Cape Province -- home to second-largest city Cape Town and site of the country's worst hotspot. A doctor working at a government clinic in Cape Town's Khayelitsha township told AFP that medics were struggling with delays in protective gear and intense mental stress. "Your colleagues are getting infected, a colleague's death is something that will hit anyone," the doctor said, on condition of anonymity as she was not authorised to speak to the press. "If you are in a war zone and a fellow soldier gets shot and you are forced the next day to go into the same war zone with that memory - that's sort of the burden." The medic said there had been a "great effort" to ensure adequate supplies of protective equipment but delays meant that carers could not always get the right size or type. Regional union boss Gerald Lotriet said since April there had been six work stoppages in Western Cape as up to 7,000 staff downed tools over unsafe hospital conditions. "I heard some nurses say to me if I had known about COVID, I would have rather joined the army," province chairman for the Hospital Public Servants Association, told AFP. "One said if you are in the army and somebody told you there is a bomb, you would run away from it and in our situation we are being told we have to run towards it." Members of the Democratic Nursing Organisation of South Africa are even planning to take at least one hospital to court for exposing its workers, said general secretary Cassim Lekhoathi. "Both the private and public sectors are delinquents in that they have procured PPEs (protective equipment), but on the ground these things are not available," he told AFP. "It is really disturbing that our members have to resort to a strike and that's the last thing we would want to see happening during a pandemic." NIGERIA Africa's most populous country has seen over 800 infections among medical staff and at least 11 deaths, according to figures from its national disease control agency. Resident doctors in poorly funded state hospitals on Monday began an indefinite strike - sparked in part by complaints over inadequate protective gear. The Nigerian Medical Association, the umbrella body for all health workers, says its members are not being equipped properly for the threat. "We are like an endangered species. Our members are daily facing the risks of infection because of inadequate provision of PPEs," a top union official told AFP. He complained that medical personnel had faced harassment from security forces as they tried to do their jobs amid coronavirus restrictions. "In Lagos, some health workers were even detained by the police for allegedly violating the curfew," he said. Another major concern is that the country appears to be rapidly running out of bed space in isolation wards as the number of infections continues to mount. Chikwe Ihekweazu, head of the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control, insisted that the authorities were doing all they could to ensure enough protective kits. He said 16,000 health workers had been trained to deal with the virus and officials were now looking to let infected people stay home rather than have to isolate in state-run facilities. "The COVID-19 pandemic has presented a peculiar challenge to health systems across the world," Ihekweazu told AFP. "We are still learning a lot." KENYA Healthcare representatives say they are seeing the number of coronavirus cases grow among those working in the sector. Dr Chibanzi Mwachonda, acting Secretary General of the Kenya Medical Practitioners, Pharmacists and Dentists' Union, said most

infections are among medics at hospitals not handling COVID-19. In the majority of cases, workers are being exposed during emergency and theatre cases on patients being handled for other ailments, only to be found to be positive. Medics from various regions have held protests in recent weeks over the lack of gear and hazard pay, including at the country's two largest facilities handling coronavirus. While the strikes ended quickly after the authorities moved fast to address grievances, they exposed what critics say are major inadequacies in the graft-ridden sector. The government insists it will use some of the \$2 billion emergency funding it has received from lenders and donors to make sure it has the "requisite equipment, supplies and medical personnel".