

ANALYSIS - COVID-19 pandemic: Great danger awaits Africa

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COVID-19 pandemic, which first occurred in China and turned into a global disaster spreading across the whole world, poses a great danger to African countries that do not have proper and robust health infrastructure. The outbreak, which was seen in Algeria for the first time Africa, has spread almost to the whole continent in a very short time.

As a result of the limited sharing of transparent information and the lack of some political tools, it is quite hard to figure out the extent of the pandemic's effects on the continent. Although the extent of the outbreak in Africa is unpredictable at this stage, it can be said that some of its effects are already observable on the geopolitical level.

The coronavirus outbreak has made it clear that problems at local and regional levels are rapidly gaining global dimensions while cooperation mechanisms for solving problems are completely inadequate. Excessive energy consumption in a certain region of the world can cause natural disasters in other regions. While there is not enough attention given to any disease in Africa, the pandemic can cause fears in the U.S, which is somewhat similar to a situation when a terrorist movement -- supported to not get harmed -- can also hit those who support it.

When people of different identities, religions or ideas are oppressed and excluded, this can become a threat to global peace. In this context, a global governance model which foresees that such problems can be overcome by the cooperation of humanity, has not yet been developed. Due to the weakness in this area, countries remain on their own also in the coronavirus pandemic, alliances become questioned, countries further clarify their boundaries, and positions of those who assume the leadership role of each crisis are revised. For example, while the U.S. is incapable of effectively fighting the pandemic, China claims to have contained the pandemic, creating a new global sphere of influence by offering health equipment assistance to Europe, Africa, and even to the U.S. through Jack Ma, the founder of Ali Baba company.

Challenges faced by leading policymakers of the international system in dealing with this pandemic make political, economic, and social geopolitical obstacles in front of global governance -- which requires cooperation -- more visible each day. So these obstacles will pose security vulnerabilities in the coming months, and the inability to govern globally will become deeply palpable.

Effects of COVID-19 pandemic on Africa

Even though the number of cases in Africa is low right now, it is currently a serious threat to the

continent. The pandemic has also spread to Africa confirmed with the positive results of virus tests, especially of the state officials, bureaucrats, people from business, arts and sports -- those connected to the outside world. It was the first case on the continent to be recorded with the detection of an infected person in Algeria. Then, the outbreak began to rapidly take effect in Kenya and other countries, notably Egypt, South Africa, and Morocco, respectively. The total number of cases on the continent, for example, was 450 on March 17, and this figure has already risen to over 5,400. So although there are currently eight countries with no confirmed case, considering the permeability of the borders, these numbers are predicted to rise in the following days.

Of the 54 African countries, 33 are among the least developed. Besides, a 2016 report by the think-tank the RAND Corporation on the most vulnerable countries to infection outbreaks in the world says 22 out of 25 countries are on this continent.

Therefore, almost all countries in Africa are unfavorable in many areas, from basic hygiene needs to health infrastructure. Other important and alarming factors are the presence of people living in unfavorable conditions in major cities, as well as communities of people displaced in sub-Saharan African countries, forced to migrate to other countries and living in non-sterile environments in camps. If the virus spreads to these areas where these people in the camps are struggling for life, what both the host countries and the international community can do may require serious restrictions and drastic measures.

Despite all these concerns, Africa has some advantages over the outbreak that has scorched countries in Asia, Europe, and the Americas. The first is the continent's recent experience with viruses such as Ebola, AIDS, malaria, and Lassa fever. The experience provides significant infrastructure support for dealing with outbreaks, but insufficient health infrastructure and problems in accessing clean water across much of the continent are issues that raise concerns. On the other hand, the fact that COVID-19 has spread to African countries later than other regions around the world can also be considered an advantage in fighting the pandemic.

The rate of spread, and level of impact of the outbreak were recognized early, and measures such as suspension of international flights, extensive disinfection work, suspension of schools, limited curfew practices, and quarantine were implemented relatively at an early stage. But the international community needs to act urgently to overcome the chronic problems that will hamper the fight against the pandemic in African countries. The fight must move from a micro level to a macro level, that is, it must be global.

Geopolitical consequences of global outbreak in Africa

The most negative impact of the outbreak -- which has already begun to have devastating consequences on both international economics and politics -- on African countries in these areas will result from the fact that oil prices have fallen to their lowest level in the last two decades. There are oil exporter countries such as Algeria, Libya, Nigeria, Angola, Congo, Gabon and Equatorial Guinea, with their incomes dependent on oil, which will deeply feel this crisis in the short term. The disagreement between Russia and Saudi Arabia on production cuts, and Riyadh's massive rise in production have led to serious drops in oil prices. This was coupled with the rapid decline in oil demand in China where the pandemic emerged, depriving the oil exporter African countries associated with this country, of their main source of income.

The fact that the oil prices remain at these levels is not sustainable, considering both the

producers dependent on oil exports, and the natural gas producers in the U.S. whose costs have risen to unsustainable levels. But it is clear that even if the effects of the outbreak are reduced, the rise in demand will not raise the oil prices too much. So the African countries, whose share of oil in total exports is over 80% on average, can be predicted to face a difficult and uncertain economic period.

The damage the global outbreak will do to the African economy in the medium term may be far more severe than its health impact. In the current situation, negative trends in stock markets, commodity prices, the value of national currencies and interest rates, as well as the blocking/reduction of international circulation are the main factors triggering a global economic crisis. The Western governments will try to overcome this crisis with large-scale aid programs for the sectors affected by the outbreak, but it is not possible for African countries that do not have the same resources to put such packages of measures in place. Still, some African countries, particularly those where the agricultural sector is thriving, are likely to overcome the crisis with relatively less harm.

Another negative development the outbreak will cause is the possibility that the "failed states" in conflict spirals can be "tested". Indeed, as seen in the examples of Libya and Mali, the number of countries open to interventions may rise. More countries may fall into the grip of poverty and famine, their boundaries and identities may become subject to harsher differentiation, with an absence of social solidarity, and weaknesses in governmental authority. Because they have rich hydrocarbon and mineral resources, regional/global powers may want to intervene in these countries.

In conclusion, the spread of the pandemic will eventually stop, and the international system will find a balance, but most of the damage will be permanent, particularly for the African countries. The current crisis heavily hitting the economies on a local, regional and global scale, will also present opportunities at its final stage, but using these opportunities requires access to the capital. Considering that the capital can only be provided by outsourcing in most African countries, the situation does not seem pleasant at all. So the initiatives taken by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank and other international institutions for the continent are vital in this process.

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* Translated by Merve Dastan in Ankara.

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