

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, April 4 (Infosplusgabon) - A global shortage of key medical supplies required to sustain the onslaught on the coronavirus outbreak is one of the biggest challenges facing African countries in their struggle to stop the spread of the viral disease.

Through its Africa Centre for Disease Control (CDC), the African Union has moved in an attempt to find solutions to the shortage of testing kits, protective clothing for medical workers and even proper training of the medical workers to handle the virus.

Reagents used in the testing of the virus are limited in supply since they are produced in Germany and Britain, which require the equipment and chemicals for own use, according to laboratory scientists.

In Kenya, a laboratory used by private hospitals to test cases of the coronavirus, quotes a minimum of US\$65 to test a single patient and requires up to 90 samples to be tested in one cahoot because of the shortage of the reagents.

In Ethiopia, the federal government has been investing in the training and equipment of laboratory workers and technicians to deal with the spread of the virus away from the national capital, because of the regular and frequent travel.

The need for face masks in Kenya, currently estimated at 60 million pieces, is unmatched by the available capacity. Two textile firms have been mandated to locally produce the masks. But one firm is capable of producing up to 25,000 face masks daily, in order to curb the public transmission of the virus, according to health Cabinet Secretary Mutahi Kagwe.

The need for protective dressing for healthcare professionals is even more pressing in Kenya, and the rest of Africa, according to Dr Patrick Amoth, acting Director-General of Health at the ministry.

"We have tried to have adequate items. These are single-use equipment. The main problem we face is that there are global supply chain challenges. We have identified manufacturing companies to produce these products locally in Kenya, but for now, we have supplies for three weeks," Amoth said.

The health authorities require ventilators which is an intelligence machine that can carry out the breathing functions for patients of coronavirus at advanced stages. Authorities in most countries prefer to distribute the ventilators to hospitals in their national capital cities, even though the disease is currently widespread beyond the national capitals.

In Kenya, Nairobi and Mombasa are the main hot spots, however, the infectious disease has spread to various places outside the capital. The equipment and medical supplies shortages reveal the real threat currently dawning on African countries.

It is not just because of the resources required to battle the preliminary spread of the virus, but lack of capacity to test, detect and prevent its communal devastation. Besides the shortage of the active chemical reagents used to test for the virus, the executives of the scientific research organisation, Africa CDC, have completed a medical equipment needs assessment for the continent, according to its report.

Africa CDC's needs assessment reveals shortage of viral transport media, swabs and extraction kits, which are required to obtain samples and specimen from patients. The CDC also recognises one of the main challenges as the ability to expand testing.

"Africa CDC is looking for all possible sources for these items and will update the African Union member States when items are available," the Africa CDC said in its weekly report on the pandemics response.

Africa CDC completed an equipment footprint analysis across the continent for GeneXpert-a genetic diagnostic test kit, used in more developed laboratories to detect drug-resistant

tuberculosis genes. The Africa CDC wants the GeneXpert for Roche and Abbott platforms.

The projected testing needs for GeneXpert have been submitted to the company. Part of the efforts to deal with the shortage of testing kits and protective gear for medics was the urgent distribution of the laboratory donations provided by Chinese electronic commerce entrepreneur, Jack Ma, which have been distributed in African countries.

Africa CDC is following the validation of the new testing protocol with the AU member states. Africa CDC is planning for distribution of additional 40,000 tests to countries that are in critical need. The Centre said it has also been working with the African Society for Laboratory Medicine, a continental society which hopes to link the rest of the continent through laboratory networks, to provide online training to laboratory technicians.

More than 110 participants attended the forum which helped to address some frequently asked questions and provide guidance on the laboratory testing issues.

Africa CDC officers are already providing training in seven countries on how to use the reagents to be supplied by the British firm, Oxford Nanopore Technologies, to test and analyse the coronavirus electronically.

The Centre said it plans to offer online training once the equipment is shipped.

Africa CDC initiated a continent-wide network of clinicians who met for the first time on 9 March 2020 and have been holding weekly seminars over the web, including 300 clinicians from across Africa.

Africa CDC also established an online portal with training materials to provide online courses, online case studies, and social media vignettes to support evidence-based care of COVID-19 patients. It continues to provide and receive updated information about the outbreak through the WhatsApp groups created for Member States communication officers and journalists.

In order to expand public education and awareness on the infectious disease, the Africa CDC produced two podcasts to provide information about the outbreak. It has been holding discussions with the Facebook to enhance campaigns and messaging for COVID-19.

Currently, Africa CDC is working on a rumour tracking system to monitor, aggregate, and respond to rumours, mis- and dis-information, and misconceptions about coronavirus.

In collaborating with the Co-Creation Hub (CcHUB), the leading technology innovation Centre in Africa, Africa CDC plans to launch a call for innovative communication projects on COVID-19 based on African languages targeted at the semi-urban and rural population across Africa.

The communication projects will help counter disbelief and misinformation, catalyse citizens actions and solidarity as well as combat stigmatization.

Africa CDC is initiating a collaboration with Resolve to Save Lives, WHO, and a private opinion research company to survey attitudes and behaviours regarding COVID-19 and community social distancing. Reports will be provided to Member States after the initial round of surveys.

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