

The Continent

with Mail & Guardian

THERE IS NO MIRACLE CURE

No matter what
Madagascar's
president may
claim



We are nobody's lab rat

“Africa can't and won't be a testing ground for any vaccine.”

So said Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the Director-General of the World Health Organisation, in early April. He was reacting to comments made by two French doctors who had suggested, on live television, that vaccine trials should be conducted here. One of the doctors asked: “If I can be provocative, shouldn't we be doing this study in Africa, where there are no masks, no treatments, no resuscitation?”

Dr Tedros was right to condemn this in the strongest possible terms. There is a long, ugly and ongoing history of medical racism on the African continent. Too often, Africans have been used as test subjects for drugs from which they would be the last to benefit.

But just as African leaders were quick to condemn these suggestions from outsiders, so too should they be equally quick to speak out when it is one of our own who is acting with seemingly reckless disregard for the health of ordinary people.

In this issue's cover story, on page 14, we examine the so-called cure being widely touted by Madagascar's president — and embraced by several

other heads of state. President Andry Rajoelina is already distributing this 'cure' to Madagascar's poorest and most vulnerable citizens.

Rajoelina is doing so before the drink has undergone any kind of rigorous clinical trials or testing. He appears to be doing so in violation of Madagascar's own constitution, which in Article 8 states that “it is prohibited to submit a person without their free consent to a medical or scientific experiment”.

There is a long, ugly and ongoing history of medical racism on the African continent

There is no evidence yet that this herbal drink has any effect against Covid-19. Nor do we know if it has any potential side-effects.

More dangerous still is that this unproven remedy may prevent people and policymakers from taking the painful measures that we know actually do work to prevent the spread of the disease: social distancing, testing, contact tracing and isolating infections.





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Inside:

- **ON THE COVER:** 'There is absolutely no evidence' (p14)
- **'Dear Mr President':** An open letter to John Magufuli (p10)
- **Inside Mozambique's** mysterious insurgency (p20)
- **The Quiz:** 'I'm sorry, I only accept payment in Afros' (p18)
- **PLUS** reporting from Ghana, Uganda, Cameroon, Kenya, Tanzania, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, South Africa and more

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Deadly floods hit East Africa

At least 260 people were killed this week in Kenya, Rwanda and Somalia after heavy rainfall led to widespread floods and landslides in the region. A further 100 000 people have been displaced in western Kenya. The Kenya Meteorological Department is forecasting that it will continue to rain in the affected areas over the coming weeks. The natural disaster is further complicating the region's efforts to prevent the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic. ■

United front

Malawi's opposition has managed to unite behind a single candidate ahead of the July 2020 presidential election. This is big news in a country where a divided opposition gifted an election win to the relatively unpopular president in the last vote (which was subsequently annulled). The man taking on President Peter Mutharika is Lazarus Chakwera, with Saulos Chilima signing on as running mate. Chilima is the current vice-president, but he fell out with Mutharika a couple of years ago. ■



About turn: Uganda has reversed its decision to ban the import of second-hand clothes (Photo: supplied)

Second-guessing a second-hand clothes ban

Last month, Uganda banned imports of second-hand clothes. The government said that it was worried that Covid-19 could be introduced into the country on used clothing items. The ban was welcomed by textile and clothing manufacturers, but traders of used clothes were not happy. After some consideration, Uganda has reversed the ban. It now says there is no evidence that disease can survive the long journey from China, Europe or the US. ■



Down the drink: South Africa's national lockdown may lead to the destruction of hundreds of millions of bottles of beer (Photo: Delwyn Verasamy)

Hops and fears

Four hundred million bottles of beer are on the line as South African Breweries — one of the world's largest brewers — negotiates with the South African government on whether it can transport its stock to storage facilities. Level four of South Africa's lockdown includes a blanket ban on the sale and transport of alcohol. If no special privileges are granted, then the company has said it will have to destroy its entire stockpile.



Covid-19's human toll

The World Health Organisation said on Thursday that its latest modelling suggests that Covid-19 could kill between 83 000 and 190 000 people in Africa in the first year if it is not properly contained. These sobering statistics involve between 29-million and 44-million people becoming infected. These figures cover 47 African countries, and exclude Djibouti, Somalia, Sudan, Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and Morocco (the WHO has a strange definition of which countries constitute 'Africa'). The organisation has urged countries to redouble their efforts to test, trace, isolate and treat infections. It also warned that health workers are particularly vulnerable. "We are very concerned that almost 1,000 African health workers have been infected with Covid-19," WHO Africa boss Matshidiso Moeti told reporters.

How the mighty have fallen

Bereket Simon was once one of the most powerful figures in Ethiopia. He was a close ally of the late prime minister Meles Zenawi, and a longtime communications minister. But since new Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed took power, Simon's fall

from grace has been dramatic. His fate was sealed in a courtroom in Bahir Dar on Tuesday, where he was sentenced to a six-year jail term on corruption charges. His supporters insist the charges are politically motivated.

Cameroon

Cameroon urges more tests for Archbishop's 'cure'

Amindeh Blaise Atabong

Late last month, the Archbishop of Douala Samuel Kleda announced that he had discovered a potential cure for the coronavirus. The Archbishop says that the herbal remedy is a cocktail of several medicinal herbs found in Cameroon, and has called his concoction 'Les Huiles Essentielles' (the Essential Oils).

Kleda, who has 30 years experience in researching medicinal plants, said that the herbal remedy had been effective in treating eight health workers who had contracted Covid-19. But he was careful to caution that it still needs to be tested. "The product is effective but we want to adopt a scientific approach. It entails analysing and evaluating the product, and looking into its side effects and risks," he said.

Despite the absence of clinical trials, Kleda has said he will continue to administer his herbal remedy to patients who request it. Hundreds of people have come to Douala from all over the country in an effort to access the remedy - many of whom are Covid-19 positive. This is against government advice for citizens to avoid intercity travel.

As of 8 May, Cameroon had recorded 2,265 cases of Covid-19, including 108 deaths.

The Cameroonian government has expressed interest in the Archbishop's proposed remedy, but has said that it must go through all necessary testing and regulatory processes. "We will put to his disposal our expertise to make sure the herbal medicine meets required regulation. This is to ensure quality and for public safety," said Dr Deli Vandj, Director of Pharmacy in the Ministry of Public Health.

The World Health Organization has said that it recognises the importance of traditional and plant-based medicines, but strongly urged governments to first guarantee their efficacy and safety through rigorous clinical trials. ■

Amindeh Blaise Atabong is a media fellow with Germany's Konrad Adenauer Stiftung

Kenya

The struggles of Kenyan sex workers

Pierra Nyaruai

It is 6.40pm and curfew-signalling sirens have started to sound in the Kenyan town of Nakuru, but Nancy Wairimu* is still hoping she'll get one last customer to close the day. Wairimu is a sex worker and, like many others, the Covid-19 pandemic has made it very difficult for her to work.

The dusk-to-dawn curfew begins just when business usually starts to pick up. "The streets are empty at night, just like our pockets. I can only afford a mask that I have to reuse so that I do not get arrested," Wairimu says.

Usually, sex workers would charge fees ranging anywhere from 200 (\$1.88) to 15000 (\$141) Kenyan shillings, but many have now dropped them to as low as 100 shillings (94 cents).

Some sex workers have been advocating for the government to add them to the list of essential services. It is extremely unlikely that this will happen — sex work is illegal in Kenya. The criminalisation and stigmatisation of sex workers means that they are excluded from emergency assistance.



Equal rights: Sex workers in Nakuru demand to be treated with dignity and respect (Photo: Suleiman Mbatiah)

This week Human Rights Watch reiterated to governments the importance of decriminalising sex work so that sex workers can access services and support.

Many sex workers live where they work. When work is closed, they are left homeless - and it is very difficult to find new accommodation during the lockdown.

Fidelis Mwikali* works on the Nairobi-Nakuru highway. Travel has slowed down and so has her business. "I'm not working right now because I do not want to risk [it]. I cannot afford the tests or all the equipment that the government wants us to have...I'm almost at the bottom of my savings and I do not want my kids to starve." ■

*Names changed to protect identity

Zimbabwe

Pandemic puts pressure on Zimbabwe's president

Kudzai Mashininga

This is Emmerson Mnangagwa's third year as president of Zimbabwe. None have been smooth, but 2020 looks to be the most challenging yet as the country confronts its worst economic crisis in a decade - alongside the looming threat from the coronavirus pandemic.

The limits of Mnangagwa's authority have been especially evident when it comes to fiscal and monetary policy. Inflation is soaring - official figures put it at 675% in March, although independent analysts suggest it could be over 1000% - and a government decree to freeze the price of basic goods has been widely flouted.

Meanwhile, Mnangagwa's finance minister Mthuli Ncube went cap in hand to the International Monetary Fund in early April to ask for emergency funding to stave off "a health and economic catastrophe", leaked correspondence revealed. In the process, Ncube took the unprecedented step of admitting that the government had failed to properly

implement promised economic reforms. "The leaked letter...portrays a scared and weak government that has no control of its immediate environment," said Ricky Mukonza, a lecturer at the Tshwane University of Technology.

This has left President Mnangagwa weaker than at any time since taking power from Robert Mugabe in a military coup in late 2017. "Even the security forces that protect him are equally unhappy that the November 17 promise has not been fulfilled. Economically we are in a worse situation than when he inherited power," said Farai Maguwu, a prominent human rights defender and Director of the Centre for Natural Resource Governance.

"The letter portrays a scared government"

It doesn't help that the president has been widely reported to be at odds with his vice-president, Constantine Chiwenga. But these reports have been denied by government officials, and not everyone is ready to write off the president - especially given the bitter infighting which is weakening the ranks of the main opposition. "For now, [Mnangagwa's allies] are prepared to protect and support him by supporting the system," said Gideon Chitanga, a political activist. ■

The Week in Numbers

4

The number of African countries added to the European Union's money-laundering blacklist this week. They are Botswana, Ghana, Mauritius and Zimbabwe. Ethiopia and Tunisia have been removed from the list.

2 years

That's how long African countries should be able to pause their debt repayments, according to South Africa President Cyril Ramaphosa. He argues that the standstill is necessary to help our economies deal with the impact of the pandemic.

\$311 million

The amount of money that the United States and Jersey has given back to Nigeria. The money was stolen by former Nigerian General Sani Abacha and is believed to be part of an estimated \$5-billion he looted. The money was stowed away in banks in the US and Jersey.

7

The number of people killed in a riot this week at Pademba Road Prison in Freetown, Sierra Leone, according to a police spokesperson. The government believes that a failed prison break is the reason for the unrest.

45

The number of companies Ghana's Food and Drugs Authority has so far registered to produce homemade face masks, gloves and face shields.

\$10 million

The amount of money the Gates Foundation and social media platform Tik Tok each donated to vaccine alliance GAVI in aid of fighting the coronavirus pandemic. Seth Berkley, chief executive of GAVI, said the potential vaccines, once proved successful, would help to prevent "a potentially catastrophic impact on immunisation programmes across the developing world".

19 000

The approximate number of sentenced inmates who will be released from jail on parole in South Africa, in order to curb the spread of the coronavirus in prisons. Those who will be released will have to be "low-risk" offenders who meet parole board requirements and have either served minimum sentences or would have served it in the next five years.



Containment: inmates will be released in an effort to combat the spread of Covid-19 in prisons (Photo: supplied)

‘Just tell us the truth’: An open letter to Tanzania’s president

President John Magufuli has been widely criticised for his lacklustre response to the coronavirus pandemic, even as case numbers in Tanzania soar. **Mwanahamisi Singano** says that Tanzanians have a right to expect more.

Your Excellency, President John Magufuli. Let me first begin by stating that no one blames you or your leadership for bringing the coronavirus to Tanzania. It is not your fault. This illness knows no borders. But your administration will be measured and judged on the basis of how you have responded to it.

Mr President, the day I lost my cousin — to what the government said later was related to Covid-19 — and decided to speak publicly, people said to me: “Mishy, congratulations for your bravery.” Have we come to the point that acknowledging bereavement requires courage? When it gets to the point of being deprived of your right to grieve, cry and be comforted, the pain is unbearable.

That is why I am writing this letter to you. I am writing it with the great pain of having lost my loved one.



No joke: President John Magufuli has been criticised for downplaying the impact of the pandemic (Photo: Tanzanian Presidency)

Mr President, we are Tanzanians. We don't wait for an invitation to a funeral. When you hear about a bereavement you join the bereaved and attend the funeral. In our culture, death is not a secret, bereavement is not a shame, and to say you have lost someone has never been a sin.

Mr President, our elders used to say: he who covers up illness, gets discovered by death. And indeed, the deaths are exposing us. Tell us the truth, even if it's bitter to swallow.

Mr President, this is a time to unite the nation. I am a Tanzanian and I know one of Tanzania's greatest qualities is our unity, especially when we face a common enemy. Right now, our enemy is the coronavirus, and not the victims of the virus.

Mr President, fear is not relieved by threats, torture or shackles; rather, it is fought by sincere and intentional government actions in the fight against this scourge. Tanzanians deserve to sleep confidently knowing our leaders and government are fighting hard to ensure our safety. Then we can all join in to fight this common enemy.

Mr President, your fellow head of state, President Nana Akufo-Addo of Ghana, said recently: "We know how to bring the economy back to life. What we do not know is how to bring people back to life," which is true. The world has no shortage of economists to advise on economic recovery, but there is no scientific or logical evidence that we can raise the dead. Those families whose loved ones are dying will not

come to find another father, mother or any other loved one to fill the gap. They will be gone, forever.

Mr President, I know that anyone who knows me, who will read this message, will fear for my safety. But to me, this is what patriotism looks like: when you stand for the public interest, no matter the risk.

"Fear is not relieved by threats, torture or shackles; rather, it is fought by sincere and intentional government actions in the fight against this scourge. Tanzanians deserve to know our leaders and government are fighting hard."

Mr President, let me end by saying that a captain's courage is tested in a storm. We are facing a terrible storm. Right now, Tanzanians are dealing with so many challenges — economic, social, and health challenges both physical and mental. They deserve to be led with the highest levels of freedom, justice, fraternity and peace. Humanity first. Wealth will come later.



Mwanahamisi Singano is an African feminist, human rights activist and global active citizen.

Home is where the cassava leaves are

Abdul S. Brima

I'm stuck in Johannesburg for the duration of South Africa's lockdown. The thing I miss most is the food from home in Sierra Leone.

I am used to eating very spicy foods — we eat a lot of leaves. Our best stews and sauces use cassava leaves, potato leaves, groundnut soup, beans, okra, crain crain and many other ingredients. But South African food is really bland compared with what I am used to. I have mostly been eating bread, sardines and frozen foods, and sometimes chicken and chips.

Every day, when my mother calls, her first question is: 'Have you eaten?' I find ways to say, 'Yes.' If I say, 'No,' she will bombard me with questions. She's even tried to teach me how to cook over the phone.

Nothing I have tasted here compares to my mother's cassava leaves. She has a special way of preparing the dish. She uses smoked fish or smoked meat and adds boiled beans, plus other ingredients, making the final product look thick and creamy.

My mother and I are very close. We

are like best friends. When I finally moved to live on my own, it was a difficult moment for her. I could still remember her staying up late at night trying to discourage me from moving out.

In my first year on my own, every weekend she would bring me cassava leaves and rice, just the way I like it. There was so much that my friends would have to help me finish it. But now she's far away. I miss her, and I miss home. Sometimes, when I'm feeling

Every day, when my mother calls, her first question is: 'Have you eaten?' I find ways to say, 'Yes.' If I say, 'No', she will bombard me with questions. She's even tried to teach me how to cook over the phone

lonely, I throw myself onto my bed and start thinking of my mother's cassava leaves. I can conjure the aroma, and that sweet taste, and then I feel at home. ■

Abdul S. Brima is a journalist from Sierra Leone. He is a media fellow with Germany's Konrad Adenauer Stiftung.

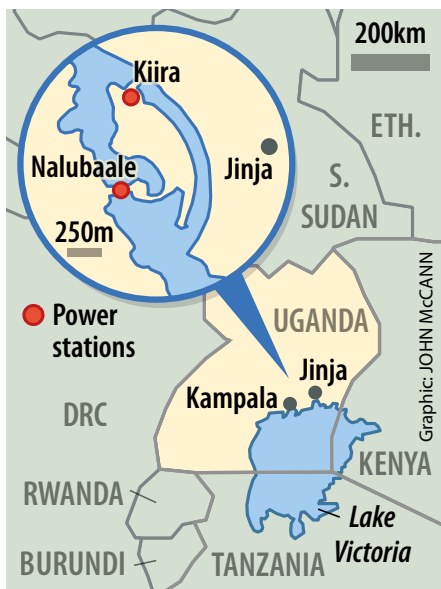
Uganda's power problem: Floods, papyrus and humans to blame

Sipho Kings

Uganda has a power problem. Two of its biggest plants, the 180-megawatt Nalubaale and 200-megawatt Kiira plants outside Jinja, are being battered by rising flood waters and floating papyrus. Both power plants are on Lake Victoria; with 23 rivers feeding the lake and only one exit, it is perfect for hydropower.

On April 14, a floating mass of papyrus mats (used across Lake Victoria and now cast afloat like islands) crunched into the dam wall. Bits of papyrus were sucked into the turbines. The country was plunged into a blackout as around 20% of the grid's capacity suddenly went offline.

The story of that moment started six months earlier, in October, when it started raining in Uganda. It hasn't stopped since. Lake Victoria's levels have risen by 1.3 metres and are just eight centimetres away from their highest-ever level. Similar downpours filled the lake in the early 1960s and mid-1990s.



Humans are also contributing: Uganda's water and environment minister, Sam Cheptoris, said a loss of forest cover as well as encroachment on wetlands and river banks meant that there was more silt in the lake and fewer natural barriers to fast-flowing flood waters. Towns and roads also mean more cement and tar, so rainwater doesn't soak into the ground and instead goes straight into rivers.

In response to the crisis, Cheptoris said the government will "remove" anyone encroaching on water bodies and forests. Chiefs who have not taken "action against encroachers" will also be dismissed. Practically, this affects people within 100m of river banks, 30m of wetlands and 200m of lake shores and forest reserves. ■



“There is absolutely no evidence”

Question marks surround Madagascar's claim of a miracle cure for Covid-19.

Aanu Adeoye and Simon Allison

On April 29, ten African heads of state met via video chat. The meeting was presided over by South African president Cyril Ramaphosa, in his capacity as chair of the African Union. Also present was AU Commission chair Moussa Faki Mahamat and John Nkengasong, the director of the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC).

The purpose of the meeting was to assess Africa's response to the coronavirus pandemic and determine what should happen next. Broadly speaking, they were all on the same page - until Andry Rajoelina began to speak.

Rajoelina, the 45-year-old president of Madagascar, was the youngest person in attendance. He came bearing what he said was good news: Madagascar had discovered a cure for Covid-19.

This was not the first time Rajoelina had made such a claim. He has been aggressively touting the benefits of Covid-Organics, a herbal drink invented by the Malagasy Institute of Applied Research. Rajoelina says the bitter drink can both prevent and cure Covid-19, and has distributed it to schoolchildren across Madagascar.

Rajoelina - a former DJ who first came to power in a military coup in 2009 - has released no evidence to support his claims.



**Untested promises:
President Andry
Rajoelina demonstrates
the herbal tea that he
claims can cure and
prevent Covid-19**

(Photo: Henitsoa Rafalia
for Anadolu Agency via
Getty Images)

At the meeting, Rajoelina urged his fellow African heads of state to embrace the herbal remedy. The other presidents did not push back, even though most had deep reservations. “You know how it works at the African Union. Once people say such a thing, his peers are supposed to compliment him,” said one source who was party to the discussions.

Grand claims

The Malagasy Institute of Applied Research occupies a tree-lined plot on the outskirts of Antananarivo, Madagascar’s capital. It was established in 1957 by Albert Rakoto Ratsimamanga, one of the country’s pre-eminent scientists, to research how local plants and traditional practices could be used to treat disease. Among its successes is Madeglucyl, an anti-diabetic drug derived from the *Eugenia jambolana* plant, widely used in Madagascar and abroad.

Covid-Organics is its latest formulation. The primary ingredient is artemisia, indigenous to China, imported to Madagascar in the 1970s, and now widely grown on the island.

Like chloroquine (also controversially touted by a head of state - Donald Trump - as a Covid-19 treatment), the plant’s active compound artemisinin is a recognised antimalarial treatment. But the World Health Organisation (WHO) advises against the use of the artemisinin compound as a preventative, and of the artemisia plant altogether, because the short half-life of the former and its low concentration in the latter accelerate resistance to treatment in active cases, rendering it useless against malaria.

President Rajoelina has made grand claims about the efficacy of Covid-Organics. It has healed two people who had Covid-19, he said. It has the “potential to change the course of history”. At a glitzy launch event in April, he said: “All trials and tests have been conducted and its effectiveness in reducing and elimination of symptoms has been proven in the treatment of Covid-19 patients in Madagascar.”

But this cannot possibly be true, said Shabir Madhi, professor of vaccinology at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. Madhi is also a founder and director of the African Leadership Initiative for Vaccinology Expertise. “There is absolutely no evidence that it has cured anything,” he told the *Mail & Guardian*.

Madhi noted that Madagascar only has a small number of confirmed coronavirus cases (158 as of 7 May). “That’s definitely not enough for a trial. Citing these sorts of numbers is a meaningless exercise.”

He dismissed President Rajoelina’s claim that two people had been “cured” by the herbal remedy. “The majority of people who have this virus show no symptoms. Of those who develop symptoms, 85% of them have mild illness. You could treat them with water and it would have the same effect.”

History repeating itself?

This is not the first time Professor Madhi has witnessed politicians make grand claims at odds with established medical evidence. He lived through that dark period in South Africa’s history during which its leaders - principally former president Thabo Mbeki - disputed the science on how to treat HIV/Aids. At one point, cabinet minister Manto Tshabalala Msimang suggested beetroot and garlic were more effective treatments than antiretrovirals - despite all evidence to the contrary. A Harvard University study found in 2009 that this misguided policy may have caused more than 300,000 premature deaths.

Both Africa CDC and the WHO are concerned about history repeating itself - and that using an untested herbal remedy such as Covid-Organics



Drink up: students in Madagascar are encouraged to take Covid-Organics to prevent contracting Covid-19, despite no evidence for its efficacy

(Photo: Rijasolo for AFP)

could have the opposite of the intended impact.

“We would caution and advise against countries adopting a product that has not been taken through tests to see its efficacy against Covid-19 and its safety in different population groups,” said Matshidiso Moeti, the WHO’s Africa region director. “We are concerned that touting this product as a preventative measure might make people feel safe to do other things [against medical recommendations, such as neglecting social distancing].”

The WHO and Africa CDC have offered to partner with Madagascar to test Covid-Organics in a proper medical trial. So too has South Africa. John Nkengasong, the director of Africa CDC, told the *Mail & Guardian*: “I heard the briefing the president of Madagascar made ... [we] look forward to seeing the data and the design of the study.”

So far, Madagascar has not shared the data underpinning its claims. Both the government and the Malagasy Institute of Applied Research declined to be interviewed for this story.

Clinical trials are critical

A lack of evidence has not deterred several leaders from embracing Covid-Organics. Last week, Madagascar dispatched 1.5 tonnes of the herbal drink to Equatorial Guinea. Another shipment went to Guinea-Bissau. President George Weah personally greeted a plane as it delivered samples for Liberia. And Tanzanian President John Magufuli - who has claimed three days of prayer can cure Covid-19 - said he would send a plane to Antananarivo to collect a consignment.

But sources within the African Union suggest most leaders remain unconvinced - even if diplomatic protocol is preventing them from saying so publicly.

One of the few institutions to speak out is West Africa’s regional bloc Ecowas, which distanced itself from claims it had ordered Covid-Organics. It said although it recognises the importance of traditional and plant-based medicine, “we can only support and endorse products that have been shown to be effective through scientific study”.

The WHO has taken a similar line. This week, it said: “Many plants and substances are being proposed [as Covid-19 cures] without the minimum requirements and evidence of quality, safety and efficacy. Africans deserve to use medicines tested to the same standards as people in the rest of the world. Even if therapies are derived from traditional practice and [are] natural, establishing their efficacy and safety through rigorous clinical trials is critical.” ■



SO, YOU THINK YOU'RE A REAL PAN-AFRICAN?

Take this quiz to find out how well you really know our continent.

- 1 By altitude, what is the highest capital city in Africa?
- 2 In Tanzania, what disease did a goat and a paw-paw allegedly test positive for this week?
- 3 Last week, Nigeria recovered over \$311 million from the estate of which former leader?
- 4 The Rumble in the Jungle - the famous boxing match between Muhammad Ali and George Foreman - took place in which city?
- 5 Canaan Banana was the first president of which country?
- 6 Cote D'Ivoire is the largest producer of which commodity?
- 7 Who is the richest man in Africa?
- 8 The Comoros are in which ocean?
- 9 Which East African won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004?
- 10 Which is longer: the length from Africa's northern tip to its southern tip, or the length from its western tip to its eastern tip?
- 11 Gitega is the capital of Burundi. What was the previous capital?
- 12 The nakfa is the currency of which country?

How did I do?

WhatsApp 'ANSWERS' to +27 73 805 6068 and we will send you the answers immediately.

0-4

"I think I need to start reading more newspapers."

5-8

"I can't wait to explore more of this continent."

9-12

"I'm sorry, I only accept payment in Afros."


 fact

CHECK

Can inhaling steam cure the coronavirus?

Alphonse Shiundu

With the world grappling with the Covid-19 pandemic, Tanzanian President John Magufuli asked citizens to look to steam inhalation as a method of treatment.

“I ask the health ministry, to emphasize this, for example the issue of steam inhalation. Scientifically, that is very clear. That’s because steam comes from boiling water at temperatures above 100°C. And because the coronavirus is made up of fats, when exposed to such high temperatures above 100°C, it will just disintegrate. It is a scientific treatment.”

Magufuli spoke in Kiswahili, so Africa Check asked language scholars what exactly the president recommended.

Dr Leonard Muaka, associate professor of Kiswahili and linguistics at Howard University, said that “kufukizia” is when you cover the head, usually with a blanket, over a container of boiled or boiling water in order to inhale steam.

Viruses cannot be “disintegrated” by steam. “The virus in infected individuals is within cells and will not be reached by steam,” said Alberto Escherio,

professor of epidemiology and nutrition at the Harvard School of Public Health.

Tsumoru Shintake, a professor at the Okinawa Institute of Science and Technology, has studied the possibility of using “controlled ethanol vapour inhalation” to disinfect the human respiratory tract of the new coronavirus and strongly discouraged physically attempting this.

“Do not try [to inhale steam]. You will damage the epithelium cells in your nose,” agreed Harvard’s Escherio.

Experts also contradicted Magufuli’s assertion that the virus is a “fat”.

“There are fats in the viral membrane” of the coronavirus, Escherio said. But to describe the virus wholly as “a fat” is misleading because its structure is more complicated, Shintake said.

Conclusion: Steam inhalation cannot treat Covid-19 and is dangerous, experts say. ■

This is an edited version of a report written by Africa Check, a non-partisan fact-checking organisation. View the original report on their website: bit.ly/AfricaCheckSteam



Making sense of Mozambique's mysterious insurgency

Even as the conflict worsens, many questions remain unanswered. **Paolo Israel**

Ransacked: An insurgent attack left homes destroyed in the village of Aldeia da Paz outside Macomia. (Photo: Marco Longari/AFP)

On April 6, Ahlu Sunna Wa Jama fighters waged an attack of unprecedented intensity on Muidumbe in the province of Cabo Delgado, a stronghold of Mozambique's ruling party.

After sweeping through lowland villages on their way into the Makonde highlands, passing the huts in which liberation leaders Samora Machel and Eduardo Mondlane had slept and strategised, the insurgents torched government buildings and ransacked the bank before splitting up to attack neighbouring villages.

Meanwhile, videos surfaced showing insurgents addressing residents in Mocimboa da Praia, which the group had occupied two weeks before. "This is the second time we come," said one

fighter, known as Bwana Omar, referring to a previous attack on Mocimboa da Praia's police station on October 5, 2017, which had made the group known to the world. "The first time we came and left; today we rule."

They were there to establish Islam and Sharia law, "whether you want it or not".

Ahlu Sunna Wa Jama appears to have formed when radicalised young men in Cabo Delgado came together in opposition both to local Sufi Islam and to the south-based Salafi National Islamic Council. They went on to establish military training camps in the Quirimbas National Park and were soon smuggling timber, coal, rubies, ivory and heroin.

More joined its ranks with the

promise of jobs or a life of banditry. Garimpeiros, informal miners treated brutally by Frelimo authorities, also joined. And the presence of Western oil multinationals in the area drew the attention of global jihadist networks.

The Frelimo government's response was to scorch the earth. In early 2018, it shelled villages near Palma on the northern border, detained hundreds of people, brutalised local populations and persecuted journalists. But insurgent attacks intensified throughout 2018 and 2019. Public and private vehicles were attacked, villages torched, travellers and peasants beheaded.

The real escalation came in late 2019 and early 2020, when the jihadists began to confront the Mozambican army in the open. In a single attack against the village of Mbau, evacuated and turned into a military garrison, more than 20 soldiers were killed.

The Islamic State was now claiming responsibility for the attacks, posting videos of the insurgents pledging allegiance to ISCAP, the Islamic State Central African Province, as well as of the attack in Muidumbe.

Initially, the government had denied the extent of the problem, likely to conceal the unpreparedness of its troops, the defections of soldiers, the casualties suffered, the human rights violations against civil populations, and the selling of arms and intelligence to insurgents by corrupted officials.

Now, however, it has deployed a mercenary company, the Dyck Advisory Group - which has deep roots in



Zimbabwe - and has reportedly stormed several insurgent bases and repelled an attack on Metuge, near the provincial capital Pemba.

In the meantime, under the cover of Covid-19 curfew regulations, journalists are increasingly being targeted. The north of the province is isolated, banks have closed, civil servants are fleeing their posts, police are targeting Muslim neighbourhoods and thousands of refugees are flooding into Pemba.

Taken together, all these different factors - the social banditry, the trafficking opportunities, the presence of both exploitative international capital and international jihadist infiltration - mean that Cabo Delgado is turning into an epicentre of conflict and instability. ■

Paolo Israel is an associate professor in history at the University of the Western Cape

Testing times for the man leading Nigeria's Covid-19 response

Nigeria's Centre for Disease Control is brimming with energy and experience, but hamstrung by chronic underinvestment. [Aanu Adeoye](#)

As the number of coronavirus cases in Nigeria began to rise, Dr Chikwe Ihekweazu realised he had a problem. The director general of the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) knew the country had to increase its testing capacity — but it lacked the equipment to do so. With the whole world competing for those supplies, sourcing more was proving difficult.

So, he took to Twitter. “We’re desperately looking for more RNA extraction kits as we expand #Covid19 testing,” he wrote, bracing for the criticism he knew would come — it’s not often a top official admits to the country’s shortcomings.

Sure enough, the criticism came. But so did the equipment. “I put out that tweet and in an hour, I had the supplies I needed,” Ihekweazu said. “Help comes in surprising ways.”

When he accepted the position in 2016, the NCDC was still in its infancy — established in 2011, it did not even have a legal mandate to operate as an autonomous government institute



No rest: Dr Ihekweazu said he is always the last to leave his Abuja office (Photo: supplied)

yet. For his part, Ihekweazu had just finished a five-year stint as co-director of South Africa’s Centre for Tuberculosis and before that was at what is now Public Health England and the Robert Koch Institute, Germany’s public health agency. His experience with epidemiology was vast.

Ihekweazu took over an agency that was brimming with confidence after its much-lauded handling of the 2014 Ebola outbreak. Harnessing that energy, he doubled its staff in two years, attracting Nigerians in the diaspora and in well-paying private-sector jobs often with little more than an appeal to their patriotism.

They received plenty of hands-on experience, dealing with the worst outbreaks of Lassa fever, yellow fever and cholera in a decade. In 2017, Nigeria had to confront monkeypox, 40 years after the last confirmed cases.

“We are not lacking for infectious disease outbreaks in Nigeria, unfortunately. We have a high population density, bang in the middle of the tropics. It is a perfect place for micro-organisms to grow,” Ihekweazu said.

It's not often a top official admits to the country's shortcomings

In 2018, the agency's status was formalised by President Muhammadu Buhari. But its annual budget is just 1.76-billion naira (US\$4.8-million), about half of the operational costs of the presidency alone, and the coronavirus has exposed years of underinvestment in diagnostic laboratories. By May 5 Nigeria had recorded 2 801 cases of Covid-19, with 83 deaths — and conducted fewer than 20,000 tests.

There are 18 laboratories around the country testing for the virus.



Put to the test: Nigeria's already fragile health system is being pushed to its limits by the pandemic (Photo: Kola Sulaimon for AFP)

These efforts suffered a setback in the northern city of Kano, however, when a contaminated laboratory had to be shut down amid a raft of unexplained deaths.

“The lab is back up and running,” Ihekweazu said. “Once we're able to get the flow of testing, isolation and contact-tracing going, we can focus on the broader epidemiological questions relating to Kano.”

Human Rights Watch has called for greater transparency regarding the situation there, citing concerns by the doctors' union and a local university that the Covid-19 outbreak is worse than the public has been told.

“This is a hard problem because the end is not in sight,” Ihekweazu said of the broader pandemic. “But there's a great sense of mission right now. Never have I seen the entire country almost closed down and watch the public-health workforce do its work. There's so much attention on us.” ■

Aanu Adeoye is a Media Fellow with Germany's Konrad Adenauer Stiftung.

Ghana's testing methods are in question

Aanu Adeoye

When President Nana Akufo-Addo announced the lifting of lockdown in Accra and Kumasi, he cited Ghana's aggressive tracing and testing of suspected Covid-19 cases.

But Ghana's testing methods have been questioned by health experts, including Chikwe Ihekweazu of Nigeria's Centre for Disease Control. "We don't want to go down that path," Ihekweazu told journalists.

"That path" is pool sampling, in which samples are combined. If a pool tests positive, each of its samples must be tested individually. But if it's negative no further testing is needed, saving time and money. "This is simple arithmetic," said Professor William Ampofo, who leads Ghana's testing efforts.

But Nana Kofi Quakyi, from New York University's School of Global Public Health, said the effectiveness of pool sampling depended on adequate data and protocols. The viral load could be diluted beyond detection if too many samples were aggregated, for example. India restricts pools to five samples, while Ghana has been pooling 10 at a time.



Getting results: An activist uses a megaphone to address members of the public on the importance of social distancing in Accra, Ghana (Photo: Nipah Dennis for AFP)

In a study published in *The Lancet*, researchers found pooling 30 samples remained viable, in a community where fewer than 2% were infected. India restricts pool sampling to areas with infection rates lower than 5%. Unconfirmed reports suggest Accra had a rate of 8.5% when lockdown was lifted.

With President Akufo-Addo up for re-election in December, testing has become undeniably political. "The government is precipitating a humanitarian crisis that it perhaps has no concrete plan to mitigate," said Quakyi. "And that has a political cost for you in an election year." ■

Aanu Adeoye is a Media Fellow with Germany's Konrad Adenauer Stiftung.

Churches struggle to raise funds during Covid lockdown

South Africa's strict, national lockdown is making it hard for churches to collect the funds they need to stay open. Tshegofatso Mathe

A video has been circulating in South Africa of self-anointed Prophet Shepherd Bushiri asking the members of his congregation to send their tithes via electronic bank transfer. This is followed by a clip of him printing proof of payment notices, with Bushiri saying he will pray for people in return.

Churches are struggling. South Africa's six-week lockdown has meant that people aren't going to church, so they aren't donating.

Reverend Thembelani Jentile, who heads the Mamelodi Baptist church in the capital Pretoria, says this is making it difficult to pay salaries and do outreach work. His church has 60 refugees that were taken in after their homes were wiped out by flooding in December. Now it's trying to give people in the area

two meals a day.

Under the lockdown, up to half of the population of South Africa is in danger of going to bed hungry.

Some churches have asked people for digital transfers. But in townships and rural communities, few people can do

this. There is also a deeper problem. Jentile says people will only give if you preach to them: "There is a transaction, which is subconscious in people's minds — you give us the

word, we give you the money. That is why you are giving to the same church, you are not going to give to someone who does not preach to you. I did not believe it. But I see it now." ■

Mamelodi Baptist church has 60 refugees that were taken in. Now it's trying to give people in the area two meals a day

Tshegofatso Mathe is an Adamela Trust business reporter at the Mail & Guardian



The Big Picture

Clean-up act: Performance artist Alex Kalemera, also known as 'Tanzania Joker', is helping to raise awareness about the dangers of Covid-19. In this photo, he helps a food vendor to wash her hands with chlorinated water at Kinondoni Manyanya Market in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. The country's president, John Magufuli, has been ridiculed for his dangerous suggestion that 'steam inhalation' is a way to beat the virus

(Photo: Eriky Boniphace for AFP)

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