

Uganda confirms new 143 Covid cases as toll hits 60

As Covid-19 cases keep rising in the country, government has asked scientists to speed up the process of developing a Covid-19 treatment mechanism that uses blood from recovered patients.

BY KEVIN ATUAHIRE & TONNY ABET

Uganda yesterday registered 143 new Covid-19 cases and two more deaths, taking the cumulative infection tally to 5,266 cases and 60 deaths.

Health ministry statistics indicate that the new cases were registered from 2,606 samples tested on Tuesday from alerts, contacts, and returnees and at points of entry.

Of the 2,606 samples, 64 cases were from alerts, 71 from contacts, eight returnees and two deaths.

Of the 135 cases of contacts and alerts, 66 positive cases were from Kampala, 15 from Buikwe, 14 from Lira, Seven from Mbale, Two from Wakiso, three from Masaka while Arua and Zombo had one each.

Uganda's Covid-19 curve continues to rise, five months after the first cases were recorded in the country.

More than 4.3 million people worldwide have been infected with the virus.

Health experts are now concerned about the rising infections, especially in congested areas such as Kampala, where majority of the populated Keep violating guidelines such as wearing facemasks, social distancing and sanitising among others.

The president is expected to address



Health minister Jane Ruth Aceng and Makerere University Professor William Bazeyo (left) launch the clinical trial that uses convalescent plasma for the treatment of Covid-19 yesterday in Kampala. PHOTO/COURTESY

the nation this week with the population hoping that the other sectors such as schools and places of worship re-

open. Last week, the government set up 40,000 beds for managing Covid-19 patients at Namboole Stadium as many

hospitals and isolation centres continue to be flooded with patients.

Experts warn

On Monday, experts warned that the country will continue to register high numbers and more deaths given the prevalence of the pandemic and violation of Covid-19 prevention measures.

Up to 92 children aged up to 12 years had tested positive for Covid-19, according to the ministry.

Dr Andrew Kambu, the executive director of Infectious Diseases Institute (IDI), attributed the rising cases to laxity in observing preventive measures.

However, he said Uganda is no exception as other countries across the globe have experienced the same.

"We benefitted from the early lockdown in terms of interrupting transmission but if you have been walking around town recently, people are violating preventive measures. What we are seeing reflects how we are observing the measures as individuals and community," he said.

Dr Yonas Tegegn, the World Health Organisation country representative, said: "We need to continue practicing the necessary preventive measures until we come up with a vaccine."

Dr Jane Ruth Aceng, the Health minister, last week said they had stepped up measures aimed at mitigating the Covid-19 infection among health workers.

She highlighted training on case identification, guidance on creating holding areas in each health facility and instituting of infection prevention, and control committees to monitor safety of workers.

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GOVT PUSHES FOR COVID-19 TREATMENT

Dr Aceng yesterday asked scientists to speed up the process of developing a Covid-19 treatment mechanism that uses blood from recovered patients in a move to curb the rising Covid-19 deaths.

The country is currently using drugs such as dexamethasone and remdesivir to treat patients but access to some of the drugs is limited because they are imported.

While launching the convalescent plasma (CP) therapy that is going to be testing Covid-19 patients to establish effectiveness in treatment, Dr Aceng said: "The clinical trial should be started tomorrow. Covid-19 is real and it is with us, anything that can be done to save lives is highly needed. Covid-19 has no treatment and what we are using currently is supportive. So having CP come on board is great."

CP refers to a colourless liquid in blood which is obtained from one who has recovered from an infectious disease and considered to be rich, especially in antibodies. She appealed to recovered patients to donate their blood to support the noble drive.

Dr Bruce Kirenga, the director of Makerere Lung Institute, who is also heading the CP development, said 162 recovered Covid-19 patients have so far come out and have donated blood and that the level of antibodies against the disease in blood was very good.

Describing the treatment as hopeful, Dr Kirenga said they have processed and stored the plasma and are now ready to kick start the clinical trial.

"All donated plasma was tested for Covid-29 and it was found negative. To be eligible, the donors had to provide written informed consent, have documented evidence of Covid-19 infection by PCR, have documents evidence of recovery from Covid-19 (defined as two negative PCR tests performed at least 24 hours apart)," he said.

Health ministry clears air on Covid-19 testing costs

BY MONITOR REPORTER

KAMPALA. The Ministry of Health has refuted claims by an Internal Security Organisation (ISO) investigation that points to inflation of costs of Covid-19 testing, procurement and use of related medical equipment.

In an article titled, 'ISO investigates officials over Covid-19 testing kits', published in *Sunday Monitor* on September 13, quoting an intelligence brief by ISO, sent to Lt Gen Muhoozi Kainerugaba, the senior presidential advisor on special duties, this newspaper and the East African Centre for Investigative Reporting (EACIR) in a joint story, reported that the Health ministry was under probe and the intelligence agency had found evidence suggesting the country had lost huge sums of money in inflated costs for Covid-19 testing and operational responses.

In a seven-page response to the story, however, the Health ministry's Perma-

nent Secretary, Dr Diana Atwine, wrote: "We wish to categorically state that the above statement is false, malicious and imaginary as it was merely based on assumptions by the authors. I, therefore, request the authors to provide the documentary evidence of the stated loss."

The ISO dossier had claimed that as of June 2020, public funds to the tune of \$4.2m (about Shs15.5b) had been lost on account of highly inflated sample collection and transportation kits.

To the contrary, Dr Atwine argued: "The authors quote Ahmad Sayed, the regional sales manager of Beijing Genomics Institute (BGI), and assert that the price of the sample collection, transportation medium and triple packaging is \$22 (Shs81,000) per test per person. We welcome the finding and solution as advanced by the authors, but we cannot purchase as long as they have met international standards. At the same time, the test kits should be compatible with the equipment available in

the country." Therefore, Ms Atwine argued that "the assumption of the said loss due to an inflated cost of \$33.69 (about Shs124,000) per test per person, leading to purported loss of \$4,232,912 (about Shs15.6b) as of June, was built on wrong assumption."

Extortion

She also clarified that the Health ministry has taken note with concern that the public has suffered at the hands of extortionists in the name of testing for Covid-19. The Ministry stated that anyone who presents to the government designated testing sites with symptoms, or are contacts of confirmed Covid-19 cases are tested free of charge.

However, she added that any person or agency who wishes to test routinely or at leisure will be ex-

pected to pay \$65 (about Shs239,000).

She also asserted that the total tests received so far are 469,041 and total committed is 911,185. Of these, 434,243 tests have so far been carried out. Some tests have, however, not yet been delivered. Some of the donations that were received by government, the permanent secretary said, were incomplete and required government to procure the necessary consumables to enable full performance, which additional costs were incurred by government.

This is not the first time the Ministry of Health is being cast in the spotlight over the cost of Covid-19 testing.

In June 2020, Dr Atwine issued a statement in response to Kampala Central MP Muhammad Nsereko, who had publicly raised the red flag on the \$65 (about Shs239,000) cost of Covid-19 testing, claiming it was inflated.

But in her response then, the PS

noted: "The PCR tests cannot be carried out excluding requirements such as sample collection, transportation media and triple packaging, which cost \$36 (about Shs132,000) per person."

However, in her Sunday statement; in response to *Sunday Monitor* and EACIR story, in September, the PS noted that "the Ministry would like to provide a detailed breakdown of the cost per person as per our procurement as of June 2020 as follows: Nasal swab - \$1.80 (about Shs6,600), Oral pharyngeal swab - \$1.80 (about Shs6,600), Triple packaging - \$2.258 (about Shs8,200), Universal Transport Media - \$8.50 (about Shs31,000), total: \$14.35 (about Shs53,000)."

The two statements bear a variance in the figures for the same items and procurement period from \$36 (about Shs132,000) to now \$14.35 (about Shs53,000).

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\$4.2m
ALLEGED LOST FUNDS