

'Africa is not a poor, helpless continent in the face of Monkeypox'

The first case of Monkeypox has been recorded in Gauteng, South Africa.

According to a statement released by the National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD) yesterday, a division of the national health laboratory service has confirmed that a case of Monkeypox has been identified through laboratory testing at the NICD on Wednesday.

The group said that the case involves a 30-year-old man residing in Gauteng, with no reports of recent travel history.

"Contact tracing has commenced, identifying any additional linked cases of monkeypox in South Africa," read the statement.

NICD added that Monkeypox is a rare viral infection in humans that has been reported in more than 3 000 individuals in several European countries.

Minister of Health Joe Phaahla, also said in a briefing that Monkeypox is usually a mild disease manifesting as blisters on the skin and that it is usually mild and self-limiting with a fatality rate of 1%.

Meanwhile, NICD said the virus is not highly transmissible and close physical contact is required for transmission. It does not spread similarly to Influenza or Covid-19," read the statement.

Associated Press (AP) reports World Health Organisation (WHO) Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus last week described the recent monkeypox epidemic identified in more than 40 countries, mostly in Europe, as "unusual and concerning."

AP reported Monkeypox has sickened people for decades in central and west Africa, where one version of

the disease kills up to 10% of people. In the epidemic beyond Africa so far, no deaths have been reported.

Declaring monkeypox to be a global emergency would mean the UN health agency considers the outbreak to be an "extraordinary event" and that the disease is at risk of spreading across even more borders. It would also give monkeypox the same distinction as the Covid-19 pandemic and the ongoing effort to eradicate polio.

No global emergency
Salim Abdool Karim, an epidemiologist and Vice Chancellor at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa, told AP that WHO and others should be doing more to stop monkeypox in Africa and elsewhere, but he was not convinced that a global emergency declaration would help.



Health Minister, Dr Joe Phaahla.
PHOTO: TWITTER

"There is this misplaced idea that Africa is this poor, helpless continent, when in fact, we do know how to

deal with epidemics," said Karim.

He said that stopping the outbreak ultimately depends on things like surveillance, isolating patients and public education. "Maybe they need vaccines in Europe to stop monkeypox, but here, we have been able to control it with very simple measures," he said.

Oyewale Tomori, a Nigerian virologist who sits on several WHO advisory groups told AP that if WHO was really worried about monkeypox spread, "they could have convened their emergency committee years ago when it re-emerged in Nigeria in 2017 and no one knew why we suddenly had hundreds of cases."

"It is a bit curious that WHO only called their experts when the disease showed up in white countries," Tomori said. Until last month, monkeypox had not caused sizeable outbreaks beyond

Africa. Scientists have not found any major genetic changes in the virus and a leading adviser to WHO said last month the surge of cases in Europe was likely tied to sexual activity among gay and bisexual men at two raves in Spain and Belgium.

To date, the US Centres for Disease Control and Prevention has confirmed more than 3 300 cases of monkeypox in 42 countries where the virus has not been typically seen.

More than 80% of cases are in Europe. Meanwhile, Africa has already seen more than 1 400 cases this year, including 62 deaths — less than the daily average murder rate in South Africa, which in 2022 stands at 67.

David Fidler, a senior fellow in global health at the Council on Foreign Relations, said WHO's newfound attention to monkeypox amid its spread beyond

Africa could inadvertently worsen the divide between rich and poor countries seen during Covid-19.

"There may be legitimate reasons why WHO only raised the alarm when monkeypox spread to rich countries, but to poor countries, that looks like a double standard," Mr. Fidler said.

He said the global community was still struggling to ensure the world's poor were vaccinated against the coronavirus and that it was unclear if Africans even wanted monkeypox vaccines, given competing priorities like malaria and HIV.

"Unless African governments specifically ask for vaccines, it might be a bit patronising to send them because it's in the West's interest to stop monkeypox from being exported," Mr. Fidler said.

— Witness Reporter