

COVID-Outbreak Responses:

The Pandemic of Racism Against Africans Living Outside Their Continent

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**Abstract**

The coronavirus pandemic has heightened racial discrimination which has followed a predictable pattern of connecting ethnicity or race to the disease. One of the dark spots of the pandemic is that it has been a pandemic of racism in which the fundamental rights and freedoms of Africans and other ethnicity are trampled upon. The pandemic has revealed anti-Black attitudes that Africans abroad must combat along with combatting the health threats of the virus. This paper describes case examples of such situation in two countries, namely China and Saudi Arabia, the main factors that made them vulnerable during the pandemic, the valuable lessons Africans must gather from the pandemic and discusses how the trend can be controlled.

**Keywords:** COVID-19 Responses, Pandemic of Racism, Africans

## **1. Introduction**

The outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic has caused many impacts which are both positive and disproportionate in some ways against humanity and fundamental human rights [1]. This pandemic has revealed that issues of discrimination, prejudice and intolerance are persisting and thriving at the global levels [2]. The disproportionate impacts include an increase in racism and xenophobia against indigenous people and ethnic minorities. The situation does not only put the lives of Africans at risk because of the discrimination and xenophobic attitudes but put everyone on the globe at risk in any part of the world [2].

Aside from the economic challenges and death tolls the pandemic has brought to the world, Africans and other ethnic groups are have been suffering from the racial abuse, harassment and violent events in public spaces. The United Nations through the General Assembly have emphasized that there is no space for any form of racism, xenophobia and discrimination in responding to the pandemic. Unfortunately, the coronavirus has been a pandemic of racism leaving some kind of people to believe that they are better than other people who look differently and this undermines international human right laws. Many Racist movements, White supremacist, Chinese people, European elites have used this pandemic to attain their racial goals and policies sustaining their claims as superiors. In a nutshell, the Covid-19 Pandemic has incited racial discrimination against Africans as if Africans were the virus themselves and the virus has manifested itself in discrimination.

## **2. Discriminations against African Nationals in China**

The Chinese people were the first to raise their heads showing their racial stands during the pandemic despite being the originators of the virus. During the period of early April 2020, authorities in the Chinese provinces of Guangdong forcibly tested Africans living and working there to ascertain their status in relation to the virus. Africans were forced to self-isolate or quarantine without any reason such as testing positive or negative for the virus. Most Africans were evicted from their rented apartments, and they have to sleep on the streets. Hotels, shops and restaurants refused to sell their essentials to African customers. Meanwhile, other foreign nationals were not met with the same treatment [2]. Although Chinese authorities attest zero tolerance for discrimination, these treatments meted out to Africans are the exact textbook definition of racial discrimination. Chinese authorities targeted Africans to the exclusion of other nationals living in Guangdong. They visited Africans in their various homes to execute this exercise and in the event, some were ordered to self-isolate under the surveillance of cameras planted around their compounds [4]. The Chinese were not concerned about the nationality of passport or visa granted but the color of the skin and in so doing African Americans living in Guangzhou also suffered partially from these discrimination. They were waging an anti-coronavirus campaign against Black people in an attempt to get them out of their country [6]. While in other parts of China Africans were harassed by the police and hospitals turned them away when they needed medical attention. All these happenings have no valid justifications and Africans do not deserve such treatments. The origin of the virus itself was Wuhan China and the Africans living there acquired the infection from the place with no history of recent travel.

### **2.1 Healthcare Utilization and Access as the Factor that made Africans vulnerable**

Racial discrimination and health challenges from Covid-19 responses spread unevenly. Black Africans have suffered both undesirable outcomes and discriminations from the virus. A variety

of factors were identified accountable for these happenings which healthcare access and utilization is the main one. People from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds react differently when it comes to healthcare in pandemic situations. These people may be unwilling to seek medical attention because they believe there are inequalities in treatments, and they do not trust the healthcare system they found themselves in. This was the case of the uproars that sparked the discrimination against Africans in China. On April 2, 2020, a Nigerian man who tested positive for the virus was reported attacking a Chinese nurse who stopped him from leaving an isolation center in Guangzhou [8]. Africans then become vulnerable to these discrimination from that point onwards and Chinese authorities in Guangzhou targeted only Africans to be tested and quarantined.

Owing to this same factor, a Ugandan national escorting his pregnant wife to the hospital in Dongguan Guangdong province were turned away and denied entry to the hospital gate on March 29, 2020[2]. Chinese authorities later on this issue communicated that the incidence was a misunderstanding due to language difficulties. Africans living in China were excluded and denied access to healthcare during the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic. All these developments were not only racial discrimination but also psychological torture for Africans, to make them feel used, unsafe and betrayed. The Chinese have shown clearly the structural inequalities and racism in Covid-19 responses.

### **3. Detention of Ethiopian Migrants in Saudi Arabia**

Each year many Ethiopian youths try to make their way to the Gulf State due to economic challenges and poverty they are facing in their home country [10]. They see this as an opportunity to seek greener pastures and escape poverty back home [10]. The migrants work in construction firms and manual domestic roles that the average Saudi national prefer not to do. What worsens the plight of the migrant workers is the racial nature and inequitable laws existing in the country

[10]. African migrants do not enjoy the same legal rights as Saudi nationals. They are being exploited by their employers and abused both racially and sexually. They also receive low remunerations for most physically arduous jobs. The country under the rule of Crown Prince Muhammed Bin Salam in 2017 enacted laws limiting the employment prospects of foreign workers [10].

Migrant workers mainly Ethiopians were held responsible and blamed for the spike of coronavirus cases in the country between March and May 2020[9]. The Saudi Government feared that these migrants could be the main vector of transmission because many of them live in an overcrowded housing environment [10]. According to statements coming from Saudi Health Authorities, nonSaudis or foreigners are made up of 76% of new cases recorded [11]. Initially, the Saudi Government expressed the need to provide medical care and safety measures to all infected individuals in the country including foreigners [12]. However, Saudi authorities held up numerous migrants mainly Africans (Ethiopians) in detention camps with overcrowded and unhygienic conditions which can be detrimental to health and could increase the risk of transmitting the virus. These inhumane treatments continued despite United Nations intervention to find an alternative way of managing the migrants in these camps [13]. The majority of these migrants were rounded up from their homes in various Saudi Arabian cities to these detention camps while others were African refugees from Saudi-Yemen Border. These African refugees are also migrant passing through illegal routes to Saudi-Arabia. They migrate by boat through the Red Sea and then by land through Yemen before reaching Saudi Arabia thus regularly using the border area between the two countries situated at Yemen's Saada governorate and the Saudi Araba's Jizan province. In the process of embarking on such a journey, many are apprehended crossing the border and a host of these migrants are detained in deplorable facilities in Saudi Arabia [9]. The Unfortunate ones are

encountered by the Houthi Armed Group who forcibly expelled them and sometimes most of them are killed. Also, at the Saudi border, Saudi forces opened fire on fleeing migrants killing dozens [9]. For those migrants who are allowed entry into the country, Saudi officials detain them in heinous conditions leaving them with no option to legally challenge their detention or arrange for deportation to their home country [9]. The Human Rights Watch has reported cases where the migrants have to spend days in detention camps in Saudi Arabia without the basic amenities of life including food and water [9].

The Jizan Central Prison in Jizan city, the Shimeisi Detention Centre East of Jeddah and a centre near the town of Al-Dayer in Jizan province along the border were some camps identified by the Human Rights Watch. According to the migrants and as reported by Human Rights Watch, they were conveyed in small cars and pick-ups from the Saudi border to these camps. At these detention centres, about 300 to 500 persons were held up in one room similar to the size of a classroom and males were separated from females [9]. Treatments meted out to the migrants differs based on gender, for instance, women were relocated to a related facility in Jizan which has improved conditions compared to their male counterpart [9]. In both cases, the overall general conditions of these migrants were poor and unacceptable especially with risk of contracting the virus. Some migrants started developing skin problems and allergic reaction [10]. Detainees were using the same clothing they have worn since arriving at the camp with no water to wash them or clean their bodies [10]. Saudi officials only took their temperatures when they were detained, but nobody bothered to arrange for a better environment, conduct Covid-19 testing or even provide preventive measures [10]. It was not confirmed whether any of these migrants contracted the Covid-19 virus according to Human Rights Watch. Furthermore, there were dozens of these migrants looking emaciated because the detention camps they were packed had small barred windows and one of

them died due to heatstroke coupled with other factors like barely getting food and water to survive[10]. Guards at these camps started abusing the migrants as evidence by scars sustained on their backs and even mocked the migrants for the non-caring attitudes of African governments [10]. From the experiences of these migrants, they were treated like animals and beaten every day. “My only crime is to travel out of my country in search of greener pastures, but here they beat us with whips and electric cords as if we were murderers” a migrant stated[10]. The inmates in these centres also started developing suicidal ideations and mental illnesses [10]. It was total hell on earth for them and during these happenings, a young boy about sixteen years of age committed suicide [10]. “If I see that there is no escape, I will take my own life as others have already” said another Ethiopian man [10]. It is definite and correct to say that Saudi Arabia was subjecting Horn of Africa migrants to inhuman conditions with no respect for safety and dignity. According to the Human Rights Watch, the general condition of the migrants at these centres were far below International Standards and a rich country like Saudi Arabia should not be in a position for holding Ethiopian migrants in such deplorable condition.

#### **4 Discussion**

Controlling racism is the responsibility of everybody not only Africans. Everyone must appreciate and understand that people are different from varied cultures [3]. All individuals must embrace this concept and treat all and sundry equally with respect, we must put behind the notion of white supremacy and end the vilification of Africans as well as marginalized people. We must all stand against ideologies of scientific and systemic racism in our various societies. Hate speeches and racial intolerance need not to be entertained in any part of the world. The international community does not need to entertain the hegemony of racialized politics of skin color. In this pandemic

period, people must avoid connecting the COVID-19 to racial discrimination. Infrastructural measures to control these racial attacks must remain active in place and the civil rights of all individuals irrespective of where they found themselves should be protected. Africans need regional coordinated strategies that are highly responsive to changing the trends of racial discrimination against its people through the African Union Commission.

The International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination which most foreign nations are signatory to, warrant that state government take steps to eliminate all forms of discrimination and guarantee the right of everyone irrespective of race, color, nationality and ethnic group. International organizations concerned such as the United Nation Expert Committee should persistently call on state governments to fully implement this legislation and in cases where there are vulnerable people like African migrants living in foreign countries. Therefore, state governments must review and implement national strategies and programs that tackle this kind of discrimination. African Governments through better governance and international organizations must carry out prompt and transparent investigations to hold accountable those responsible for discrimination against Africans. African leaders should not keep quiet on addressing some of these discrimination. In this situation, they must take up these issues with the Chinese and Saudi Arabian government respectively. African governments through the African Union Commission must demand justice by requesting Saudi authorities to investigate and appropriately discipline security personnel firing Ethiopian migrants at the Yemen Border and physically abusing those at the Detention Camps. Lack of action or silence from African governments will make Africans more vulnerable to future prejudice [14]. If African leaders don't care about their citizens, they will likely be maltreated and subjected to this turbulence.

State governments must also be tasked with the responsibility of educating their citizens against racism to control the trend. This is highly attainable because racial discriminatory behaviors can be learned and unlearned [15] In the case of racial discriminations faced by Africans in China, little effort has been made to educate Chinese citizens [14]. In China, racist tropes have appeared in a Chinese detergent advert and even on china's biggest lunar New Year television show [14]. Chinese nationals have opposed the action by the government to make foreigners get permanent residency in China, and they see foreigners being given extra benefits leading to concerns of unfairness and inequity. These are part of the reasons why they don't welcome foreign nationals like Africans in their country. Therefore, massive education campaigns to desensitize these notions are required by the Chinese government.

Every Country must evaluate and re-evaluate its response to these International Human Rights Law such as the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination to guarantee the rights of everyone irrespective of race and color. Concerning migrant living conditions in Saudi Arabia Detention camps, facilities do not meet International Standards or not in line with the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for Treatment of Prisoners [10]. Besides, pregnant women and children should not be subjected to migrant detention according to the guidelines for asylum seekers and also these migrants should have undergone medical screening for health-related reasons, but this was not done in Saudi Detention Camps. This implies that, the 1951 Refugees Convention and established asylum procedures that protect foreign nationals in the country have been undermined and the Saudi government should immediately re-evaluate that to allow the United Nations to exercise these mandates.

The happenings in these two countries point out that although the coronavirus pandemic is a global problem, there have been discrimination against non-citizens and people of color especially

Africans which worsen their existing vulnerabilities [16]. State Governments, Human Right Institutions, the United Nations and citizens of countries have the responsibility to advocate and fight against these discrimination [16]. The criminalization of racial inequity and needed penalties in all countries should be intensified and promoted because it can control racial superiority and discrimination levelled against non-citizens and vulnerable people in society [17]. Our differences or race must complement one another than reprovig and elimination of racial intolerance will make the world a better place to live for all [16].

### **5. Conclusive Lessons for Africans**

The racial discrimination associated with coronavirus pandemic need both continental and international solidarity to address it. African states need to work together and align with each other in the fight against racial bias because Africa has many vulnerable populations. Africans should also realize the need to develop their continent because they can only be safe and thrive economically without racial discrimination within the Continent of Africa.

### **DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST**

There is no conflict of interest and competing interest

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