

SOUTH SUDAN: In search of stability and ready to fight COVID-19

South Sudan, the youngest republic in Africa, has a population of about 11 million people and immense natural resources. It is recovering from a long civil war of almost seven years after the separation from Sudan. It has been plagued by destabilization, rebellions and militias and is marked by poor infrastructure and clearly inadequate health systems. The recent agreement between the Government in Juba and opposition forces led by Riek Machar promises more stability into the future.

South Sudan, where United Nations presence is significant, with its personnel and peacekeeping forces going in and out and with many members of the business community having regular interaction with the outside world, seems paradoxically to have been spared for sometime in comparison with neighbouring countries.

Nevertheless, the country did not wait for the confirmation of the first case to put in place restrictive measures. The President of the Republic Salva Kiir Mayardit set up a High-Level Taskforce on COVID-19, chaired by the First Vice President, Riek Machar, to coordinate the national response on COVID-19. It became the 51st African country to report a case of coronavirus infection and declared its first case on 5 April 2020, when its measures had already been in place since 14 March.

Preventive measures and restrictions

South Sudan began on 14th March, 2020, by suspending all flights from coronavirus affected countries. Between March 20 and 25, it put in place further measures, tightening them as the number of cases increased. These measures included:

- closure of all schools and universities;
- prohibition of all sporting, social, political and religious gatherings;
- decree of a curfew from 8:00 p.m. to 6:00 a.m. for 6 weeks. The starting time was later changed to start at 7pm;
- closure of restaurants, except for take-away food;
- prohibition of "Bodaboda" motorcycle taxis from carrying passengers;
- suspension of domestic flights between the capital Juba and the states; between the states, and later of all public and private ground transportation;
- travel ban on all officials;
- quarantine of all diplomats and other citizens and residents allowed to return to the country;
- closure of borders, except for the transport of goods and foodstuffs;
- intensive campaign on personal hygiene, reducing human contact, maintaining social distancing in the workplace.

As in some other countries, the implementation of these measures has not been easy. Despite the punitive measures put in place, there have been clear cases of non-compliance and mistrust on the part of the population. A significant incident was reported in the media on 27th March 2020 where hundreds of people in northern Upper Nile escaped from a quarantine centre in Renk district. About 500 South Sudanese crossed the border into neighbouring Sudan.

There have also been cases at the borders, especially with Uganda where testing equipment was not available and other cases of difficulty in getting samples for testing to Juba, the capital, because of transportation problems.

However, the negative impact in terms of access to basic necessities as a result of the measures have been minimal. This may be because the country still benefits from the support of UN and humanitarian organizations.

In addition, the Government put in place a system to monitor and support constituencies in the management of the response.

The Ministry of General Education in South Sudan also launched a commendable initiative, involving a distance education programme of essential courses such as English, mathematics and science for primary and secondary school students. These courses were to be broadcast on national radio and television stations.

Trade Union intervention

Among the measures proposed in favour of workers is one relating to a four-hour working day with full pay. This measure was adopted by the Ministry of Labour, which is part of the Taskforce chaired by the Vice President of the Republic.

The South Sudan Workers Trade Union Federation (SSWTUF) has reported that the union collaborates with the Ministries of Labour and Health and is involved in making and monitoring decisions that have been taken to combat the spread of COVID-19.

In partnership with health institutions and local NGOs, the union sensitizes workers for one hour a day through the official radio station. The SSWTUF is satisfied that the government is doing its best within the limits of available resources and the support of development partners.

Prior to the health crisis, however, the salaries of public servants had been frozen for six months

Conclusion

Since 7 May, South Sudan began to relax the restrictions, despite the rising number of cases in the country. As of May 25, 655 cases had been confirmed with 6 recoveries and 8 deaths.

Of particular note is the narrowing of the curfew; the resumption of the activities of bars and restaurants; permission to carry passengers on motorcycles; and the opening of shops, in compliance with the measures of social distancing, curfew and compulsory wearing of masks.

Relaxing the restrictions may be a way of appeasing the population, which was not calling, not only for a normal resumption of activities, but also for the continuation of national reconstruction in the context of the lull between the militias.

In South Sudan, the economy is mainly based on oil which has posed many challenges in recent times. The opportunities for collaboration and national mobilization which the crisis has provided should be built upon. The chance that the SSWTUF has had in joining to make decisions on the national response to COVID-19 and in monitoring their implementation should be used by the social partners to strengthen social dialogue so that the workers' voice can feature in national decision making. This can also help South Sudan to consolidate its stability coming out of a protracted civil war and lay the basis for its peaceful progress.