

Sudanese search for oxygen cylinders as Covid third wave swells

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11 May 2021

Sudan is struggling to provide hospital beds, drugs and medical oxygen to Covid-19 patients hit by a third wave of infections that is straining the country's patchy healthcare system beyond what it can cope with.



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With a population of over 40 million, Sudan has recorded 33,000 cases and over 2,600 deaths since the start of the pandemic, but officials say the real numbers are likely to be much higher given low rates of testing.

In recent weeks, an acute shortage of oxygen, partly due to power cuts that impeded production at the country's main plant, has left hospitals unable to provide adequate care to desperately ill Covid patients.

"My father passed away due to the lack of an intensive care bed with a ventilator," said Khartoum resident Sayda Mahmoud, 34, crying as she recounted his last moments.

"I saw him in front of me as he was dying, suffering and in pain from shortness of breath for hours until he took his last breath while waiting in a government hospital," she said.

Social media is awash with desperate pleas for help from relatives seeking beds, drugs and oxygen cylinders for their loved ones.

Officials say about 300 ventilators are available in the country, a number that is nowhere near what would be needed to respond to the current emergency.

A government study showed 38% of oxygen cylinders had been smuggled out of the health system for certain patients to use at home. Some patients bribed hospital staff for the cylinders, while others relied on personal relationships.

"At times of peak coronavirus infections, the crisis of the weak capacity of hospitals in providing beds for patients, providing oxygen cylinders and ventilators, becomes clear," said Montasir Othman, director of the Emergency and Epidemic Control Department at the Sudanese Ministry of Health.

Last month, officials said Sudan could meet just 40% of its need for medicines. The country has 37 hospitals that can take in Covid patients, but only 11 of them are in the capital Khartoum even though it has more than 70% of the cases.

Hussein Malasi, a senior manager at the Sudanese Liquid Gas Company, said that under normal circumstances the firm could produce enough medical oxygen to meet the country's needs, but the country lacks the cylinders needed to transport it.

Authorities say they are urgently facilitating imports of about 1,250 more cylinders to meet patient needs.

The shortage of oxygen and wider failings of the health system are a symptom of a deep malaise in Sudan, which has been stuck in an economic crisis for years.

Following the secession of the oil-producing South in 2011 and decades of international isolation due to U.S. sanctions, the country lacks the foreign reserves needed to procure medicines and other medical supplies abroad.

Authorities complain that only 160,000 have received the first dose of the AstraZeneca vaccine, much less than 400,000 expected by the end of April, due to widespread scepticism and misinformation.

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