Chinese Billionaire Jack Ma to Donate Coronavirus Test Kits, Face Masks to Africa

By Max Bearak

ADDIS ABABA – Chinese businessman Jack Ma said he will donate up to 20,000 Coronavirus test kits and 100,000 masks to each African nation during his discussion with Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed on Sunday.

The continent is seeing a steady spread of the coronavirus across the continent, with six new countries confirming cases on Saturday.

That means 25 of Africa's 54 countries have COVID-19 patients, with the Republic of Congo being the latest country reporting a case, late Saturday.

According to WHO, demand for personal protective equipment like gloves, masks and hand sanitizer means that there are now global shortages.

Asia's richest man told Abiy that his intention to ship testing kits and masks to African nations in an effort to combat the coronavirus pandemic.

Jack Ma's charitable foundation and his company's foundation, the Alibaba Foundation, have also sourced and donated similar supplies to other countries being hit by the virus, including U.S., Japan, Korea, Italy, Iran and Spain.

"In Africa, Abiy said ensuring preparedness for COVID-19 is critical to mitigate possible health disasters. Abiy and Jack Ma also agreed on ways of working together to halt the spread of COVID19 on the continent", the Prime Minister said in a tweeted message.

Abiy expressed his "great appreciation" to Jack Ma for partnering with Ethiopia to distribute up to 20,000 coronavirus testing kits per country and over 100,000 masks for each African country as well as guideline books developed recently on how to treat patients with the virus.

"Material support coupled with enhanced knowledge is key to COVID19 containment," the PM said.

African governments and health officials are racing to try to contain the spread of the new virus on the continent of 1.3 billion people.

If the disease spreads locally within the continent, health officials warn that several countries with fragile health systems could see higher mortality rates.

"With COVID-19 officially declared a pandemic, all countries in Africa must act," said Dr Matshidiso Moeti, WHO Regional Director for Africa.

"Every country can still change the course of this pandemic by scaling up their emergency preparedness or response," she said. "Cases may still be low in Africa and we can keep it that way with robust all-of-government actions to fight the new coronavirus."

Apart from South Africa and Algeria - which have clusters of transmission linked to imported cases - the confirmed COVID-19 cases in the African region are sporadic imports from European countries, mainly Italy, France, Germany and Spain.

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African economies to Lose ‘Billions of Dollars’ due to COVID-19 Impact

ADDIS ABABA – The Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) on Friday warned the unfolding coronavirus crisis could seriously dent Africa’s already stagnant growth with oil-exporting nations losing up to US$ 65 billion in revenues as crude oil prices continue to tumble.

ECA Executive Secretary, Vera Songwe told reporters that having already strongly hit Africa's major trading partner, China, COVID-19 was inevitably impacting Africa's trade.

She said, although a few COVID-19 cases have been reported in some 15 countries far, the crisis was set to deal African economies a severe blow.

"Africa may lose half of its GDP with growth falling from 3.2% to about 2% due to a number of reasons which include the disruption of global supply chains," said Songwe, adding the Continent’s interconnectedness to affected economies of the European Union, China and the United States was causing ripple effects.

She said the continent would need up to US$ 10.6 billion in unanticipated increases in health spending to curtail the virus from spreading, while on the other hand revenue losses could lead to unsustainable debt.

COVID-19, Songwe said, could reduce Nigeria’s total exports of crude oil in 2020 by between US$ 14 billion and US$ 19 billion.

The ECA estimates COVID-19 could lead to Africa’s export revenues from fuels falling at around US$ 101 billion in 2020.

Remittances and tourism are also being affected as the virus continues to spread worldwide, resulting in a decline in FDI flows; capital flight; domestic financial market tightening; and a slow-down in investments - hence job losses.

Pharmaceuticals, imported largely from Europe and other COVID-19 affected partners from outside the continent, could see their prices increasing and availability reduced for Africans.

With nearly two-thirds of African countries being net importers of basic food, shortages are feared to severely impact food availability and food security.

Furthermore, negative consequences are expected to worsen, if COVID-19 develops into an outbreak in Africa.

In addition, a decline in commodity prices could lead to fiscal pressures for Africa’s economic powerhouses such as South Africa, Nigeria, Algeria, Egypt and Angola.

Speaking at the same Press Conference, Stephen Karingi, Director of the ECA’s Regional Integration and Trade Division, said there, however, was an opportunity the Continent could take advantage of as trading within the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) is set to commence this July.

"The intra-African market could help mitigate some of the negative effects of COVID-19 through limiting dependence on external partners, especially in pharmaceuticals and basic food," said Karingi, adding diversifying economies away from fuel-driven was vital beyond COVID-19.

He emphasized the need for the continent to urgently implement the AfCFTA as he urged African countries who export drugs to prioritize selling on the African market.

The ECA suggests African governments could review and revise their budgets to reprioritize spending towards mitigating expected negative impacts from COVID-19 on their economies.

As a safety net, the think tank is urging governments to provide incentives for food importers to quickly forward purchases to ensure sufficient food reserves in key basic foods items.

Karingi said fiscal stimulus packages are also crucial if the continent is to weather the COVID-19 storm.