

Climate change is the biggest human health risk, says Africa's disease boss

Climate change is the biggest threat to human health in Africa and the rest of the world, the head of the continent's public health agency said.



A view shows a part of Sidi El Barrak dam at low water levels, in Nafza, west of the capital Tunis, Tunisia, 7 January 2023. Reuters/Jihed Abidellaoui

Mitigating that risk was top of his agenda, Jean Kaseya, the director general of the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), told *Reuters* as he headed to the COP28 climate summit in Dubai, which begins on Thursday.

The measures needed, Kaseya said, would include funding to help countries in Africa trying to contain outbreaks of disease.

In an online interview, he said the threat of "a climate change-related disease becoming a pandemic and coming from Africa" was what kept him awake at night.

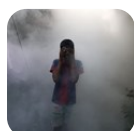
Since the start of this year, Kaseya said Africa has tackled 158 disease outbreaks.

"Each outbreak, if not well managed, can become a pandemic," he said.

This year's climate talks for the first time will include a health day on 3 December, which Kaseya and global health figures from around the world are expected to use to raise awareness of the link between climate change and health.

Scientists have linked a surge in diseases, including dengue and cholera, to rising global temperatures, which have broken records this year.

Extreme weather events such as floods can also help diseases spread and challenge response efforts. Deforestation, a contributor to climate change, also pushes humans into closer contact with disease-carrying animals, like bats.



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Speaking on the sidelines of the international conference on public health in Africa, taking place in Lusaka, Zambia, until Thursday, Kaseya said that the mistakes of Covid-19 must not be repeated, particularly concerning equal access to vaccines and treatments.

"No-one will be safe if all of us are not safe," he said.

As a result, he said the CDC was encouraging regional vaccine manufacturing initiatives as well as a pooled procurement mechanism for African countries to lower prices.

In addition, he said he expects the African Medicines Agency, the first continent-wide regulatory body, will be operational by 2024.

For outbreaks that spread regionally, the CDC is drawing up procedures to declare "public health emergencies of continental concern", echoing the World Health Organization's (WHO) terminology used to flag the most significant health threats internationally.

Last year, leading African scientists and public health experts criticised the WHO's decision to only give mpox its highest level of alert after the disease spread beyond Africa, where it had been a problem for years.

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