
Coronavirus: 39 cases and no deaths in Mozambique. The missionaries “extreme caution and deep hope”

As of April 22, Mozambique, one of the poorest countries in the world bordering South Africa, with 30 million inhabitants and many social and political problems, reported 39 cases of coronavirus, 8 recovered and no deaths. The Country declared nationwide state of emergency at the beginning of April. Schools and entertainment venues have been closed. Events and mass gatherings are forbidden, visa applications have been suspended. All precautions are recommended: hand-washing and social distancing. Many women can be seen wearing coloured Capulana hand-made face masks, a traditional coloured fabric used for skirts. Since the outbreak of the health crisis, the government led by President Felipe Nyusi, at his second term in office, reassured the population that the situation was under control and provided 500 beds in ICU units equipped with ventilators. A few days ago a Chinese businessman announced that he would donate another 500 additional ventilators and a thousand test kits. Yet unexpectedly the government changed position, forecasting 20 million infections over the next six months, requesting EUR 465 million from the international community to deal with the Covid-19 emergency. In the last few hours a Mozambican NGO accused the government of propagating an "alarmist scenario" to collect further international aid and funding for other purposes. "These are huge sums that not even the whole of Africa, through the African Union, would have dared to ask for", Don **Maurizio Bolzon**, Fidei Donum missionary from the diocese of Vicenza, under quarantine in Beira, commented to SIR. The missionary serves as parish priest, along with two Venetian confreres, in one of the poorest neighbourhoods in the city of Beira. They were invited three years ago by Archbishop Don Claudio Dalla Zuanna, member of the Sacred Heart (Dehonian) congregation of Vicenza. The missionary is concerned but also full of hope.



The request to avoid social gatherings is incomprehensible to African culture, accustomed to very intense forms of interaction. All the houses in the suburbs are small and very hot shacks. Life takes place outdoors. The government had - fruitlessly - requested to let only 4 people into 12-seater vans, usually packed with up to 20 people. There was a popular uprising. But the government imposed compulsory face masks to be worn on public transport. The second stage of the lockdown ends on April 30, and the government's next steps are yet to be decided. "The national TV - anticipates the missionary - announced an extension of the lockdown. But in fact, nothing is certain, also due to the lack of independent news. It's very hard to grasp the whole picture." **“Hope without lowering the guard.”** "The slow spread of the virus must not lead us to lower our guard," remarked the missionary. "Of course, the situation here is very different from what happened in Italy and in the rest of Europe". Don Bolzon, along with the local Church, agrees with the analysis of Rino Scuccato, a doctor from Piacenza based in Mozambique. According to Dr. Scuccato the number of swab tests carried out so far are not enough to understand the spread of the virus. However, if there were clear cases of Covid-19 it would be impossible not to know, since it cannot be mistaken for other causes of death. "The fact that in our cities no one has taken to the streets yet," the missionary said, "means that something different is happening in these lands."

“At a time when we are surrounded by catastrophic thoughts and words, perhaps we should send out a message of hope.”

The armed conflict in Cabo Delgado and in the central area of Mozambique. Mozambique is also facing a couple of situations of conflict. For the past two years armed groups of unclear origin have been attacking villages, churches and mosques in the north, at Cape Delgado, killing young people who refuse to join the rebels, out of retaliation. Approximately 200,000 people have fled

villages to save themselves from the violence. On top of that the population is ravaged by malaria, cholera and now the Covid-19 risk. The bishop of Pemba, Monsignor Luiz Lisboa, sent out a request for help days ago denouncing the lack of food, clothing and the need to rebuild houses destroyed by armed guerrilla groups. Meanwhile, in the centre of the country, the opposition party refused to recognize the present leader, a section left and did not hand over the weapons. The rebels continue conducting armed attacks on public transport, with deaths in the streets and people trying to escape. *"This, in addition to Covid-19, weighs on heavily on the general situation."* **The whole Church placed under quarantine.** As a precautionary measure, the Catholic Church of Mozambique has been complying with the due safety measures since March 21: all celebrations, meetings, confessions, pilgrimages, catechesis, choirs, funerals, and lessons in Catholic schools have been suspended. Seminaries, convents and formation homes are under quarantine. Easter was celebrated behind closed doors, Masses were broadcast on local Catholic radios. No missionaries in Beira asked to return to their country of origin. They all chose to remain close to the local population. However, they are worried because they are aware of the risks they are running, given the weak health system and widespread poverty: "88% of Mozambicans live from day to day doing casual jobs, without guarantees whatsoever, buying the food they can afford by the day." **Shortage of face masks.** Even health care workers are lacking protective face masks. The Community of Sant'Egidio, operating in Mozambique for a long time with the project Dream against HIV/AIDS, has taken steps to produce and distribute them.



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said Don Bolzon. In fact, figures show that as of April 22, Africa reported as many as 1,197 deaths caused by Covid-19, with over 23,000 cases in 52 countries. The World Health Organization continues to say that we must prepare for the worst. "Who knows what the truth is? Should we prepare for the worst, or is there something in Africa that will make it less tragic than expected?", he wonders. In his view

"there are reasons for hope: I have always believed in the God of the poor, standing on their side".

"I firmly believe," he added, "that God will watch over these people and this land, where public health care is not available to all, in a special way. When man cannot rely on medicine, he lifts his gaze to the skies."

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