

COVID-19 menaces Mozambique though no cases yet reported in the country

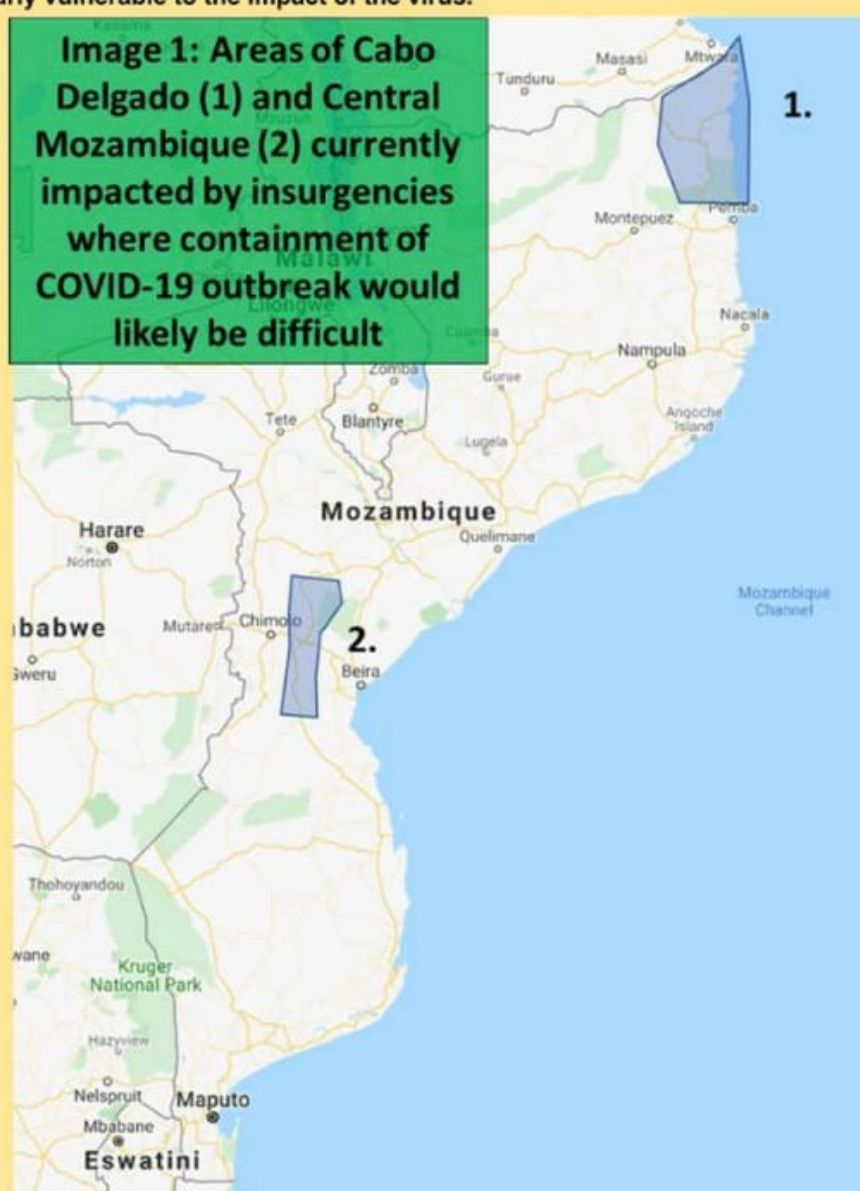
No COVID-19 cases have yet been reported in Mozambique, though the spectre of the virus looms large over the country. An outbreak could potentially be difficult to contain due to the country's poor health systems, and could spread into parts of the country where containment would be nearly impossible. Land and air links could potentially be temporarily closed in the near future as has happened elsewhere, and quarantines could also impact parts of the country. Economically, trade with two of the country's most important partners, China and South Africa, could also be at risk.

Mozambique as of 12 March has not reported any confirmed cases of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), though a number of Chinese and other nationals are quarantined with symptoms similar to COVID-19 in different parts of the county. 17 cases have been confirmed in neighbouring South Africa, while 1 case was confirmed this week in nearby DRC. No other cases besides these 18 have been reported in Southern or Eastern Africa.

Despite COVID-19's not yet appearing in the country, Mozambique is vulnerable to the virus in different ways - both in attempting to contain a countrywide outbreak and to the economic effects that a prolonged outbreak worldwide could have.

Mozambique's health system and emergency response capabilities are both relatively poor, and there is a high probability that an outbreak in the country would not be contained and could impact large segments of the population before eventually ending. Some parts of the country, such as Central Mozambique and Cabo Delgado, would likely be particularly vulnerable to the impact of the virus.

- The UN's 2019 Global Assessment Report on Disaster Risk Reduction listed Mozambique as the 3rd most vulnerable country in Africa to disaster risks, saying that among other disasters the country over the past 35 years had experienced 23 epidemics. A recent Mozambican government report indicated that 19% of health facilities in the country lack electricity, and the country in general has some of the poorest healthcare standards on the continent, with 1 in 10 facilities lacking a water source, and 1 in 5 facilities lacking a bathroom.
- At the present time, a COVID-19 outbreak would most likely begin in Maputo – via the country's busiest airport. Government authority and healthcare is strongest in the capital, and containment would be more likely in Maputo than in any other location in the country if the virus was caught early. By contrast, an outbreak in parts of Central Mozambique where RENAMO dissident militants have been active in recent months or in Cabo Delgado,



where Islamist insurgents have semi-territorial control over some rural areas, would be incredibly difficult to isolate and halt (see Image 1). Outbreaks in these areas, particularly Cabo Delgado, could see cases of COVID-19 persist for months due to ineffective quarantines because of partial territorial control of some areas by insurgents, similar to the recently contained Ebola outbreak in the Eastern DRC, which began in August 2018 and was only in March 2020 brought to a halt.

- Much of Central Mozambique and Cabo Delgado were also impacted by cyclones in 2019, impacting millions of people. Recent reports from the International Federation of the Red Cross indicated that as many as 310,000 people remain in need of assistance; many of these are displaced and malnourished people potentially more vulnerable to COVID-19 and who would be potentially more difficult to quarantine due to their irregular living situations.

The virus, even if it does not enter Mozambique, could in the coming weeks cause the partial or complete closure of land and air links that would likely impact a lot of those operating in the country. The government could also consider a wider quarantine – measures already taken by other countries.

- The government could move to close land borders in the near future. The opposition RENAMO party has already called for the border with South Africa to be closed, and the government has stepped up health screening measures on this border. The proliferation of cases in other neighbouring countries could lead to similar measures along all of the nation's borders. The escalation of the outbreak in South Africa could also prompt the Maputo government to close these borders, likely for a number of weeks, and depending on outbreaks in neighbouring countries, Mozambique could ultimately move to shut down additional border crossings.
- Several countries across the continent have already closed down airlinks (or airlines have halted flights themselves) to prevent the spread of the virus, and Mozambique could conceivably follow suit in the coming weeks. Kenya for example has temporarily halted all flights from Italy and China, while Turkish Airlines on 10 March halted flights to Nigeria to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Similar measures could impact Mozambique within the next month, disrupting air travel to and from the country.
- In the face of the worldwide COVID-19 outbreak (declared a pandemic by the WHO on 11 March), several countries have already responded with regional or even nationwide quarantines, halting (to different degrees) international travel, limiting even domestic travel and severely curtailing business activities. Italy has imposed a nationwide quarantine in the face of over 12,000 COVID-19 cases, while El Salvador, which has not yet reported a single case, declared a nationwide quarantine on 11 March as a preventive measure. The Mozambican government has not indicated its intention to declare such a quarantine, but in the case of a nationwide lockdown, business and travel activity throughout the country's main hubs, including Maputo, Beira, and Pemba, would likely be very limited or halted for at least a short term period of 2-3 weeks.

COVID-19 has already impacted the country's economy, principally because of links with China. Links with other important trading partners could be impacted in the near future as well.

- Mozambique has one of the closest relationships of any African country with China, a relationship that began in the 1960's when China provided support to the then FRELIMO rebels fighting against Portuguese occupation. Trade between the two countries was estimated at \$2.5 billion in 2018, growing 23% from the previous year. China is Mozambique's third largest export and import partner, representing at least 12%. Mozambique's Central Bank on 03 March warned that slumping trade with China due to the disruption of complex supply chains between the two country is already taking place. The bank also warned that an extended epidemic would likely cause higher domestic prices in Mozambique due to the significance of the trade balance with China (See Figure 2). A general fall in exports and resulting loss of revenue and potential dip in growth is also likely if trade remains depressed due to the outbreak.
- Reports on 11 March did in fact already indicate that there had been significant rises in prices in February, including among other items on public transport (12.5%) peanuts (8.4%) and cooking oil (4.4%); these price rises were at least partially impacted by strained trade links with China.
- Perhaps an even more significant threat to Mozambique's economy is a large outbreak in South Africa. As already discussed, The closure of the South African border could potentially occur due to a large outbreak in the country. South Africa is Mozambique's largest trading partner, accounting for 30.5% of its exports and 26% of all Mozambican imports; much of this trade passes through their shared land border. The closing of this border, even for a relatively short period of 3 weeks could cause significant harm to Mozambique's economy and have significant indirect effects throughout the country.

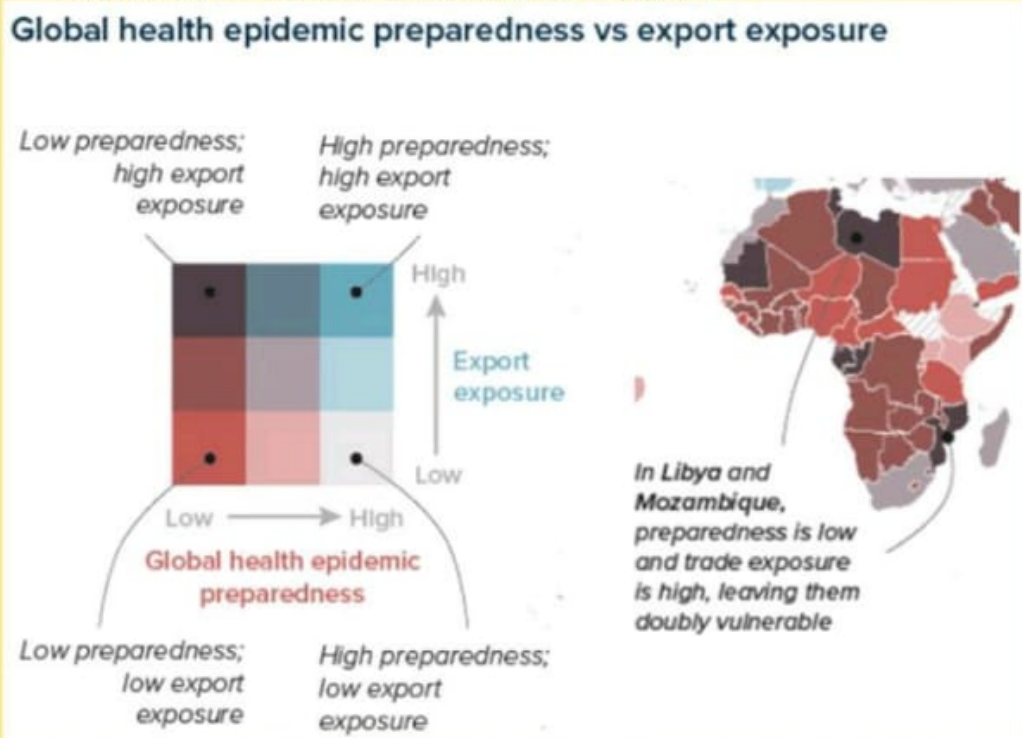


Figure 2: Mozambique's epidemic preparedness and export exposure vulnerability (Image Credit: Global Health Security Index, World Bank)