

Africa Infodemic Response Alliance

A WHO-HOSTED NETWORK



AIRA Infodemic Trends Report

19-26 February 2024

Weekly brief #108

Top concerns

[Cyclone Eleanor hits Mauritius amidst rise of dengue cases](#)

As cyclone Eleanor approaches Mauritius, local authorities caution around the spread of more dengue cases.

[Online users attribute the spread of Lassa fever to alleged corrupt practices in Nigeria](#)

Online users commenting on Channels Television's posts attribute the spread of the disease to purported financial misconduct by local authorities.

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Public Health Infodemic Trends in the African Region

This weekly report provides key highlights and operational recommendations based on social listening data from February 19-26 in Africa.

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Mauritius

Cyclone Eleanor hits Mauritius amidst rise of dengue cases

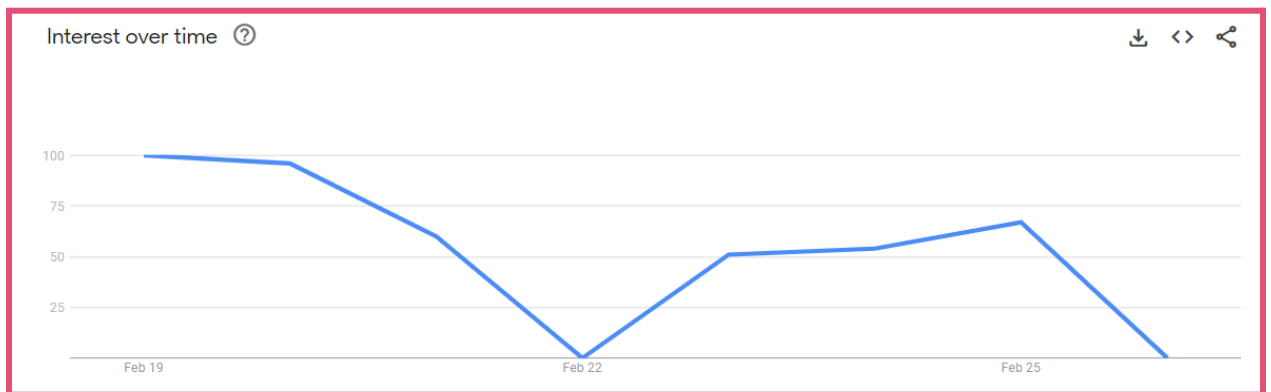
Engagement: **22 posts, 2646 likes, 351 comments**

- An article by TOP FM Mauritius draws attention to the escalating dengue cases, quoting former health services director, Dr. Vasant Rao Gujadhur, who asserts that "[the epidemic is not under control](#)." According to the [same outlet](#), the Ministry of Health reported 520 active cases, with 74 hospitalizations as of yesterday, indicating a persistent rise in dengue fever cases on the island.
- During the same monitored week, the [European Commission](#) forecasted that cyclone Eleanor will closely approach Mauritius' eastern coast on 22 February, "with slight strengthening".
- The potential impact of tropical storm Eleanor on the dengue epidemic in Mauritius is double edged according to an article by [defimedia.info](#). It [could cause water to accumulate, encouraging further mosquito proliferation and may be beneficial as the winds could eliminate adult mosquitoes](#). An online user who commented on the Facebook post, [inquired more information on suggested preventive measures](#) in that regard.
- Monitored discussions on dengue in Mauritius emphasised the interest of online users about the 10 days' isolation protocol put in place by local authorities. [An online user questioned this rationale asking "why 10 days of isolation when dengue is not transmitted from human to human"](#).

Why is it concerning?

- Following the passage of tropical cyclone Eleanore, local authorities are forecasting [a high risk of increased cases](#). The downpours could also lead to "[accumulations of water, favouring a further proliferation of mosquitoes which would occur two to three weeks after the rains](#)" according to Dr Diana Iyaloo, head of the vector biology and control division at the Ministry of Health.
- The ongoing dengue epidemic, as highlighted by [Dr. Kursheed Meethoo-Badulla](#), regional public health superintendent at the Ministry of Health, is unparalleled. According to the latest [situation report](#), there's a notable daily surge in dengue cases, surpassing previous epidemics' daily averages of 30 to 50 cases.

- The analysis of the interest in dengue fever in Mauritius reveals a fluctuating pattern over time, with a notable peak before the passage of cyclone Eleanor, indicating a heightened awareness or concern. The impact of cyclone Eleanor diverted the public's attention from the topic of dengue fever. However, there is a slight uptick, suggesting a potential correlation between weather events and health-related concerns in the region. Further examination of these fluctuations could provide insights into the factors driving public interest and awareness of dengue fever in Mauritius. “Symptoms of dengue fever” was a breakout search with 140% interest during the same week.



Source: Google trends, Interest over time of dengue fever from 19 to 26 February in Mauritius

What can we do?

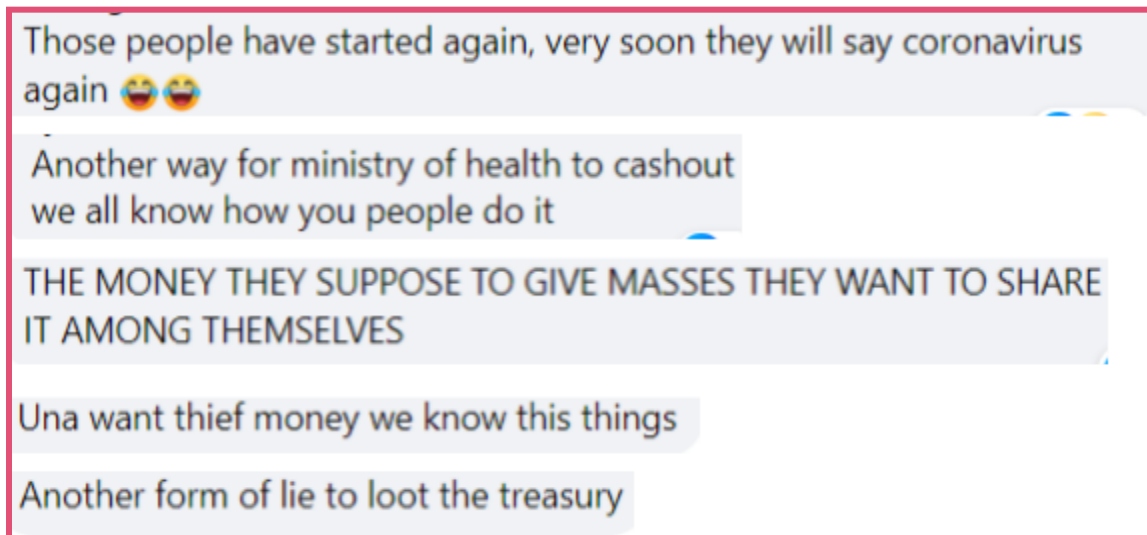
- Disseminate information regarding dengue in coordination with the Ministry of Health and health partners including information on dengue symptoms and the established protocol measures for an effective response. Sustain a heightened level of information dissemination, particularly in the aftermath of Cyclone Eleanor, emphasising its impact on the surge in dengue cases within the country.
- Establish a call centre to give the opportunity for citizens to inquire about dengue by providing a platform for questions and responses. Continue monitoring the level of interest in dengue online and offline and promptly address any arising questions or concerns.
- Share informative VFA content on dengue on both the Ministry of Health's social media platforms and those of health partners. The video is available in [English](#) and [French](#), and explains the symptoms of dengue fever, and outlines the preventive measures to adopt. Develop with communication and public health partners additional communication material based on social listening findings.

Nigeria

Some online users attribute the spread of Lassa fever to alleged corrupt practices in Nigeria

Engagement: **18 posts, 2378 likes, 235 comments**

- On 22 February, the governor of Kaduna state posted on [Facebook](#) about a suspected outbreak of viral haemorrhagic fever (Lassa fever) at the 44 Nigerian Army Reference Hospital located in the capital city of Kaduna.
- The [Nigerian Army](#) reassured the public on Facebook, emphasising that there is no cause for panic regarding the suspected outbreak of Lassa fever while acknowledging public concern about the suspected outbreak.
- In three separate Facebook posts shared by Channels Television [[LINK](#), [LINK](#), [LINK](#)], Facebook users who actively share posts while expressing complaints, have voiced concerns linking the spread of the disease to perceived corrupt practices within the political sphere. This emphasises a broader discourse surrounding the accountability of local authorities in addressing health crises and highlights the need for transparent and effective governance in public health management. Below are some comments:



- In the recent AIRA report #[107](#), we highlighted instances of misinformation and conspiracy theories found in the comments section of posts by Channels Television. Notably, there were accusations from users with a history of posts related to the Biafran war [suggesting an ideology that cannot coexist with the local Nigerian government] suggesting that the media was fabricating false information about the outbreak.

Why is it concerning?

- The article titled "Epidemiological Trends of Lassa Fever Outbreaks and Insights for Future Control in Nigeria"¹ outlines that Lassa fever cases typically peak during the dry season (January to March), with sporadic occurrences also noted during the wet season (May to November). Therefore, "[the pattern of Lassa fever outbreaks in Nigeria over the years is worrisome and increasingly becoming more challenging with frequent and widening geographical spread](#)". The emergence of Lassa fever in Kaduna, a region not originally associated with the presence of the disease, reflects an expansion in the geographical spread of Lassa fever beyond its traditional boundaries.
- Channels Television is perceived as government-affiliated and primarily serves as a platform for expressing opinions on current events, with comments gaining significance during political developments. Conversely, local news outlets in Kaduna, including Nagarta Radio, Kaduna Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria, Radio Nigeria Kaduna, and Kaduna State Media Corporation, lack sufficient coverage of Lassa fever-related information despite the crucial role these local outlets play in disseminating vital health information to the community. The inadequate reporting presents a significant challenge to public awareness, potentially leaving the community uninformed about Lassa fever risks, symptoms, and preventive measures.
- The ongoing situation in Nigeria presents a notable concern regarding the potential escalation of the disease to other endemic countries such as Sierra Leone, Guinea, and Liberia. The interconnected nature of regional health risks emphasizes the need for vigilant monitoring and collaborative preventive measures to mitigate the spread across borders.

What can we do?

- Continuously monitor the situation in Kaduna State, particularly in the event of a significant rise in Lassa fever cases. Investigate the potential presence of an infodemic by examining information gaps or misinformation that may be circulating, as this could contribute to an increase in cases or a high case fatality rate (CFR). Implement targeted measures to address and rectify any identified issues in information dissemination to ensure accurate public understanding and promote effective preventive measures.

¹ Olayiwola, J. O., & Bakarey, A. S. (2017). Epidemiological Trends of Lassa Fever Outbreaks and Insights for Future Control in Nigeria. *International Journal of TROPICAL DISEASE & Health*, 24(4), 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.9734/IJTDH/2017/32823>

- Tailoring the communication strategy based on regional nuances, considering factors such as language preferences, public health authorities' acceptance levels, and overall community receptiveness is important. Boosting the coverage of Lassa fever on Facebook accounts targeting Kaduna residents can be beneficial.
- In anticipation of the potential spread of Lassa fever to neighbouring areas of Kaduna, there can be significant benefits in proactively disseminating RCCE materials. In fact, according to a research article² published on [Frontiers in communication](#), “the authors suggest that giving [sufficient focus to outbreak communication messages](#) during periods of heightened anxiety may result in enhanced understanding of infectious diseases.”

Persistent trend

Confirmed death of cerebrospinal meningitis of senior high school student in Ghana

- In AIRA report #[107](#), we highlighted a statement by the Ghanaian Ministry of Health addressing the health implications of the prevailing weather conditions, including meningitis.
- On 27 February, the [Ghanaian Standard](#) reported that autopsy findings for Stacy Okyere, a deceased first-year student of Aburi Girls Senior High School, indicated that she succumbed to cerebrospinal meningitis.

Trends to watch

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, Radio Okapi reports more than 50 cases of bubonic plague including five deaths

- As reported by [Radio Okapi](#), a radio station based in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and established as a partnership between the United Nations Mission in the DRC (MONUC) and the Swiss Fondation Hirondelle, approximately 50 cases of bubonic plague, with five fatalities, have been documented in the Rety health zone since last week, situated roughly 100 kilometres north of Bunia town in the Djugu territory of Ituri.
- The initial case was reported within the community on February 8, 2024.

² Ben-Enukora CA, Oyero O, Okorie N, Ejem AA and Omowale AT (2023) Perceived public alarm and comprehension of risk communication messages about Lassa fever in Nigeria: a gauge of the risk communication model. *Front. Commun.* 8:1052397. doi: 10.3389/fcomm.2023.1052397

- The article mentions that local sources indicate that among the patients, about 10 students from Kpandroma primary school exhibited symptoms of the illness during classes.

Community leaders in the region are advocating for effective management of the rapidly spreading disease. Simultaneously, health authorities are advising the local population to enhance hygiene practices to combat rats, the primary vectors of this endemic disease in the area.

- According to [WHO](#), “bubonic plague is the most common form of plague and is caused by the bite of an infected flea.” “As an animal disease, plague is found in all continents, except Oceania. There is a risk of human plague wherever the presence of plague natural foci (the bacteria, an animal reservoir and a vector) and human population co-exist.”

Numerous polio immunisation campaigns scheduled in February and March

- The Expanded Program on Immunization (PEV) of Cameroon announced on Facebook that from March 1 to 3, 2024, [a coordinated nationwide vaccination effort against poliomyelitis will take place](#) in Cameroon, Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and the Central African Republic. A total of 11 online users conveyed positive sentiments including “[wishing the mobilizers and vaccinators the best](#)” with hopes to achieve a 100 percent success rate in the upcoming vaccination campaign against polio.
- In response to the Ministry of Health's [announcement of a circulating poliovirus variant in Zimbabwe on 16 February](#), two emergency national polio vaccination campaigns have been scheduled for February and March 2024, targeting all children under the age of 10. There were numerous reshares on X and Facebook from online media agencies and private users with relatively small numbers of followers. Despite overall limited engagement, [a post from UNICEF Zimbabwe](#) garnered 89 comments.
- Three users express concerns about the increasing number of vaccines for children, expressing worry that the frequency may be too extensive. Below are their comments:

These vaccines are now too much, are you not using our kids as lab rats now testing the effectiveness of your vaccines? In how many other countries are these campaigns being done nearly after every 3 months there is a new vaccine for the kids, what are the side effects and after effects in the long run. If whatever you are giving them is not working why not stop do enough research and then come.

There has been a rise in the number of polio immunizations in Zimbabwe currently, why is this? Coz it looks like every term there is a call for children to get the polio drops... what are we missing??

How many times do kids get this polio vaccine



Some online users advocate for killing hyenas after they test positive for rabies in Kenya

Engagement: **6 posts, 1307 likes, 311 comments**

- Responding to recent hyena attacks in Juja and Ongata Rongai, Kajiado county, subsequent investigations by the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) revealed that the [hyenas tested positive for rabies](#).
- KWS has initiated a two-day extensive mass vaccination campaign targeting dogs in high-risk areas. According to [KWS](#), “mass vaccination of dogs has proven to be highly effective in reducing incidents of rabies and preventing its transmission to humans and wildlife”.
- The surge in human-hyena conflicts in Juja and Ongata Rongai has prompted serious concerns regarding public safety and wildlife conservation.
- Certain [online comments](#) express hate speech directed at hyenas and advocate for their killing. Below are some comments:

The government should kill all the wild animals and settle people on game parks. Humans are superior to animals.

This is not a hyena, this is a devil spirit pretending to be a hyena. I have never heard of hyenas eating people like this. this is not normal

Juts eliminate this creature, no longer useful

Kws should stop their upside down naratives of talking to hyenas,it will reach a point where the public will decide to hunt these things down n eliminate them.

They should just kill these animals if they can't afford to give them food, human life is more precious

- According to [WHO](#), “rabies is a vaccine-preventable, zoonotic, viral disease affecting the central nervous system. Once clinical symptoms appear, rabies is virtually 100% fatal.”

Key resources

Lassa fever

- [WHO](#) : Lassa fever fact sheets
- [NCDC](#) : Lassa fever situation report, Nigeria

Dengue

- [WHO](#) : Dengue information sheets
- [WHO](#) : The global dengue situation
- [GAVI](#) : Dengue, vaccine profiles
- [Viral Facts Africa](#): content on dengue

Meningitis

- [WHO](#) : Meningitis fact sheets
- [WHO](#): SOP for surveillance, preparedness, and response to meningitis epidemics in Africa

Methodology

The social media listening process relies on a combination of social media analyses conducted for French, English, and Lusophone-speaking countries.

The shift from a social media listening monitoring conducted by only one person for the whole African region into a combined one based on the analysis conducted by three different people may result in a less detailed and exhaustive report.

Engagements, otherwise known as interactions, **refer to the number of likes, comments, reactions, and re-shares on a post.**

This is not a perfect measure of engagement:

- Some may have seen the post and chosen not to interact with it;
- Commenting on or re-sharing a post may constitute a more meaningful form of engagement than simply reacting to it;
- We are not systematically distinguishing between the types of responses that each engagement generates (e.g. while a post may contain misinformation, people may be countering/ debunking it in the comments).

We seek to mitigate these limitations by:

- Scanning comments and monitoring reactions to qualitatively evaluate responses to each post;
- Assessing the velocity of a post (i.e. how fast is it obtaining reactions, likes, and shares) and the re-emergence of specific themes;
- Identifying whether the post is shared across a variety of platforms and sources (broad engagement), or simply soliciting a high level of attention within a given community/ platform (siloes engagement).

The monitoring reports are produced using NewsWhip Analytics, Crowdtangle, Google Trends, and UNICEF Talkwalker dashboards as well as the WHO EPI-WIN weekly infodemic insight reports and the WHO EARS platform.

As a result, data may be biased towards data emerging from formal news outlets/ official social media pages and does not incorporate content circulating on closed platforms (e.g. Whatsapp) or groups (e.g. private Facebook groups).

We also rely on our fact-checking partners, who provide invaluable insights into relevant national and regional trends or content, as well as country-level reports, including the South Africa Social Listening Weekly Report and the Mali Social Listening Weekly Report.

In producing these summaries and recommendations, we have consulted community feedback survey reports, as well as monitoring and recommendations from AIRA partners. We also draw from WHO EPI-WIN weekly reports and UNICEF monthly reports to formulate recommendations. As we produce more content, we seek to

triangulate and corroborate information across these groups to strengthen our infodemic response.