

International

Nigerian startup helps local churches digitize operations

Nigeria registers about 45,000 COVID-19 cases

LAGOS: Henry Okolo has grown accustomed to using his phone to stay in touch with God during the coronavirus pandemic. He uses an app every Sunday morning to listen to a virtual service in Nigeria's commercial capital, Lagos. Okolo, a father-of-two, has used it to help his family pray at home following the closure of churches in March. Lagos state, with more than 15,000 confirmed infections and about 200 deaths, has the largest share of Nigeria's about 45,000 COVID-19

cases. The O'Sanctus app, created last year by Nigerian tech firm Applus Dome Limited, allows Catholics to attend virtual services, reserve time with priests and make financial offerings. "It made so many things easy for us," said Okolo.

It is part of a broader trend across Africa which has seen people worshipping remotely, often by watching sermons online, because of the widespread closure of churches. The closures have played a crucial role in the battle to

stop the novel coronavirus taking hold across Africa, which has the highest number of Christians of any continent - 631 million people as of 2018, or 45% of the continent's population - according to the Center for the Study of Global Christianity. O'Sanctus, originally launched as a church management tool for one parish, covers four digitized parishes and has garnered more than 3,000 subscribers.

Mercedes Otakponmwenhi, who runs Applus

Dome Limited, said the app was set up with the aim of digitizing parts of church activities without realizing that the highly infectious virus would force people to worship from home. In a push to ease restrictions, authorities in Lagos last week said places of worship can re-open from Friday, Aug 7. But the need for digital worship is not over. Places of worship can open for services only once a week, and at no more than 50% capacity.—Reuters

Dozens of anti-Buhari protesters arrested

ABUJA: Nigerian police have arrested dozens of protesters demanding better governance from President Muhammadu Buhari's administration, activists and lawyers said. But police said the protesters were arrested for breaching COVID-19 rules on social distancing. The security forces moved in as peaceful demonstrations called by the #RevolutionNow Movement took place in cities across Nigeria, including the capital Abuja and economic hub Lagos, said the campaigners. "In Abuja, the police fired teargas to disperse the demonstration and in the process, many people were injured," protest leader Deji Adeyanju told AFP.

"A total of 62 protesters were arrested from two protest locations in Abuja but they were released later," he said. Human rights lawyer Femi Falana confirmed their release. Adeyanju referred to 20 other protesters being held in Lagos, the nation's largest city with over 20 million inhabitants. They were arrested in the Ikeja area of the city during a peaceful protest, he said. "The arrest was basically for the violation of COVID-19 protocols," Abuja police spokesman Anjuguri Jesse Manzah told AFP.

He said the police had only cautioned the suspects on the need to comply with virus safety measures before releasing them. Organizers said Wednesday's protest also marked the first anniversary of the demonstration called by Omoyele Sowore, an activist and publisher of online media group Sahara Reporters. It did not in the end, go ahead, because Sowore was arrested two days before the event, and later charged with treason for calling for a revolution against the government. He was released in December.—AFP

Pandemic: In Kenya, alarm over 'rise in teen pregnancies'

NAIROBI: Sixteen-year-old Linnet covers her face bashfully, mumbling into her hands as she recounts how she met the young man who bought her fries and gave her money, before leaving her pregnant and facing even greater poverty than before. She is one of thousands of teenagers who fall pregnant every year in Kenya, a problem experts fear is worsening during the coronavirus pandemic, with some girls pushed into transactional sex to survive while others have more sex as they stay home from school.

Shortly before the pandemic hit Kenya in March, Linnet's farmer parents in western Busia sent her to Nairobi to find a job as they could no longer afford her school fees. She moved in with her sister, her sister's husband — the sole breadwinner — and their two small children in a tiny corrugated-iron room in the Kibera slum. Food was scarce and the advances of the 22-year-old boda-boda (motorbike taxi) rider, and the luxuries he offered, were hard to resist.

"He would buy me some fries, shoes and also give me some money," said Linnet, her dress of brightly-colored flowers stretched tight against her four-month pregnant belly. She said she had asked him to wear a condom, but he had removed it during intercourse. He has demanded she terminate the pregnancy, and the romance has dissipated. "I am too young to be pregnant and now I am going to be a mother to a kid," she said. "A child needs porridge, milk, money. I feel bad."

'The tip of the iceberg'

Kenya has long grappled with high teen pregnancy rates. However numbers had fallen from 82 pregnancies per 1,000 girls between the ages of 15 and 19 in 2016, to 71 per 1,000 in 2017, according to Save the Children. Last month, figures from a leaked health ministry document showing thousands of girls had fallen pregnant during lockdown between March and May led to fierce debate on social media. In Nairobi alone almost 5,000 girls fell pregnant, just over 500 of them between the ages of 10 and 14, according to the figures from a data unit within the ministry.

Both President Uhuru Kenyatta and his Health Minister Mutahi Kagwe have mentioned the rise in teen pregnancies during addresses to the nation. "Teenage motherhood is a catastrophic, disempowering outcome in the life of a girl. More often than not it spells doom to the teenager's attainment of life's full potential," Kagwe said last month. Evelyn Opondo, senior Africa regional director at the Centre for Reproductive Rights, said evidence of an uptick in pregnancies directly linked to the pandemic was still "anecdotal".

However she believed the numbers are merely "the tip of the iceberg" as most girls do not seek proper ante-natal care. She said teen pregnancies were likely increasing during the pandemic because girls were idle at home, or "engaging in relationships for survival". Some children get free lunches or free sanitary towels at schools, which will remain closed until at least 2021. Being home also places an added burden on parents who may have lost their jobs.

"So the young girls will turn to men who will be providing them with pocket



NAIROBI: Linnet (left), 16, who is around 3 months pregnant covers her face with a hands during an interview with her sister Carol (in mirror), 22, at her sister's home in Raila slum, next to Kibera slum in Nairobi. —AFP

money, money for pads," Opondo said. "We have seen this even before the virus so you can imagine how much worse it must be." Oriema Otieno, a 30-year-old doctor in Embakasi on the outskirts of Nairobi, says he has seen more pregnant girls than usual at his clinic, which is run by a reproductive health NGO. "Normally with schools open and teens in school we see two in every three months. Now there has been a rise, about seven to eight in one month in this community."

No sex education

According to Opondo, one of the main drivers of teen pregnancy is ignorance. "We know that in Kenya there is no comprehensive sexuality education... a lot of girls lack information on how to prevent unintended pregnancies," she said. Implementing comprehensive sexuality education in Kenya is a persistent challenge, drawing fierce pushback from religious institutions and conservative groups.

A 2017 analysis by the Guttmacher Institute found that, while various policies exist to provide sexual education in Kenya, topics are limited and do not include information on contraception. It noted that "messages conveyed to students were reportedly fear-inducing and judgemental or focused on abstinence, emphasizing that sex is dangerous and immoral for young people." Meanwhile, the topic is taboo at home. "Let us not lie to ourselves, our kids are having sex," said Ritah Anindo, 22, a youth advocate for the NGO Reproductive Health Network Kenya.

"Now children are at home, they are not studying. Rich kids, probably they are having online classes but kids in (poor communities), what are they doing?" Anindo said. "Our kids are idle so what do you expect at the end of it all? Teenage pregnancies, new HIV infections, unsafe abortion." For many girls like Linnet, hopes of ever returning to school will be fully dashed once they give birth. "Most of them will not be able to go back to school... it requires a lot of support, financial support, emotional support," Anindo said. "We may have more teenage pregnancies than COVID cases and it is so sad." —AFP