COVID-19 MOVEMENT RESTRICTIONS
DELAY CARGO TRANSPORT IN EAST AFRICA

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- As COVID-19 has spread across the world, at least half a dozen national governments in East Africa imposed restrictions on the cross-border movement of trucks and their drivers in response.
- This has led to longer waiting times and growing truck queues at borders in recent weeks after governments unilaterally changed border processes.
- The new restrictions may influence social unrest among truck drivers in the region, which could further disrupt operations at border crossing points.
- Although some countries have begun to bilaterally ease restrictions for certain nationalities or at specific border crossing points, truck driving restrictions could have far-reaching consequences for cargo transport and business activities in the region. If the current patchwork of restrictions persists for the foreseeable future.
- In response to the growing number of restrictions, the East African Community (EAC) released new guidelines in April highlighting ways to facilitate cross-border movement of cargo amid the COVID-19 crisis.

INTRODUCTION

Since it first emerged in the Chinese city of Wuhan in December 2019, COVID-19 has spread rapidly to almost every country across the globe. In the first quarter of 2020, many European countries as well as the United States were hit particularly hard with tens of thousands of confirmed infections and thousands of deaths. In contrast, outbreaks in Africa remained comparatively small during the first global wave of the pandemic. However, as many countries began to ease movement restrictions throughout April, truck drivers emerged as the center of new infection clusters in East Africa. As a result, at least half a dozen national governments in the region imposed restrictions on the cross-border movement of trucks and their drivers in response.

By mid-May the Governments of Uganda, Kenya, Zambia, Rwanda, the Central African Republic, and South Sudan had all imposed health and safety measures that resulted in the delay of cargo movement in and out of their territories. Due to a limited number of transport corridors in East Africa, the knock-on effects of these restrictions are often felt far beyond their own borders, and have impacted cargo transport across the whole region.

National governments have so far resisted domestic calls to ban foreign truck drivers from entering their countries completely, with the President of Uganda calling the idea of blocking truck driver access to the region’s landlocked countries “suicidal.” Nevertheless, political pressure to impose even more restrictive measures on truck drivers could gain traction quickly if infection numbers among drivers escalate, given the stewing effects a major virus outbreak is expected to have in the region.

These doing business in East Africa should therefore take the time to familiarize themselves with the measures already in effect and adjust their supply chain flows accordingly.
TIGHT-KNIT TRANSPORTATION NETWORK PARTICULARLY VULNERABLE

Even though the quality of the continent's road network varies significantly across regions, the vast majority of height across Africa still moves over-road. In East Africa, two central transport routes, opening from major seaports in Kenya and Tanzania to the landlocked countries in the African heartland, make the region an important gateway into the whole continent. While the 1,500 km long Central Corridor links the Port of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania with Zambia, Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), all 3,700 km long Northern Corridor spans the Port of Mombasa in Kenya to Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, South Sudan, and the DRC. In recent weeks, COVID-19 related driving restrictions started cropping up along these routes, which could have both short- as well as long-term consequences for cargo movement in the region.

Border crossing points across the region have seen longer waiting times and growing truck queues in recent weeks after governments unilateral altered border processes to curb the spread of COVID-19.

In April, Kenya banned drivers arriving from the DRC, South Sudan, and Rwanda, while Rwanda prohibited drivers from Tanzania and Uganda from entering its territory. Around the same time, the Central African Republic temporarily banned truck drivers from Cameroon, and Zambia closed the central Tunduma-Nkana border crossing with Tanzania for cargo movement for several days in mid-May. While Rwanda eased some restrictions on Kenyan and Tanzanian truck drivers by May, Tanzania banned all foreign truck drivers from entering its territory in mid-May and now requires all goods to be picked up by a Tanzanian truck at the entry point. Several governments have implemented a relay system, which requires foreign drivers to hand over their trucks to a "relay" driver waiting at the affected entry point to continue the journey in order to keep cargo moving across national borders. So far, these systems have been introduced in Rwanda, Kenya, and the CAR. Uganda did not ban any specific drivers from entering but since early May, requires all of them to provide a negative COVID-19 test result as it continues to debate the implementation of a relay system.

Some governments have also made changes to customs clearance processes which have slowed down the processing of foreign drivers still allowed to enter or leave a country. From April 27, Rwanda moved customs clearance processes, which were previously only conducted in its capital Kigali to its border crossings instead. Kenya first introduced mandatory mass testing for its own drivers in April before leaving Kenya a number of them tested positive for COVID-19 in neighboring countries, but has since expanded testing to everyone entering to enter or leave the country. Uganda implemented a testing regime at its borders in April, while Rwanda followed in May with a similar approach. As a result of these new measures, several border crossings such as the Buda and the Naboba crossings between Kenya and Uganda reported truck queues of up to 30 km since mid-April, while more and more drivers are stuck in border areas across the region for as long as a few days to a full week due to processing delays at customs offices. Some others have already reported that round trips have increased from around 5 days to up to 2 weeks as a consequence of the delays.

The new restrictions may influence social unrest among truck drivers in the region, which could further disrupt operations at border crossing points. Protests broke out at border crossings between Tanzania and Rwanda after the latter banned drivers from the former entering, while protests of Rwandan truck drivers being attacked by Tanzanian truckers surfaced on social media at the beginning of May. Further protests were reported along Highway 1 between Bungoma and Busia, where Cameroonian truckers protested against COVID-19 restrictions in the Central African Republic, as well as at the Malaba border crossing between Kenya and Uganda. Kenyan drivers also threatened to boycott transporting cargo destined for Uganda at the beginning of May in response to what they consider harassment and discrimation by Ugandan authorities and border communities at entry points. Discontent among customs officials, who feel increasingly overwhelmed by managing the growing number of trucks waiting to be processed at borders, is reportedly also rising.
PATCHWORK OF RESTRICTIONS LIKELY TO REMAIN IN PLACE AS COVID-19 FEARS PERSIST

LONG-TERM RESTRICTIONS MAY DRIVE UP COSTS OF DOING BUSINESS IN EAST AFRICA

Although some countries have begun to lift relatively wide restrictions for certain nationalities at specific border crossing points as of May 22, some warn that truck driving restrictions could have far-reaching consequences for cargo transport and business activities in the region if the current patchwork of restrictions persists for the foreseeable future.

The measures outlined above are already driving up overall transport times across East Africa, resulting in higher costs and security risks for those transporting goods in the region. According to sources, some trucking companies defaulted on their debts just weeks after the measures were put in place because of additional maintenance costs incurred by longer transport times. If the relay systems remain in place, trucking companies also warn that the measure will likely result in a significant truck driver shortage in the medium term. The new system will supposedly require recruiting and training a significant number of new drivers to have enough to regularly switch them at border crossings throughout the journey, a task many companies may not be able to stomach. Additionally, some have warned that the relay systems will put the safety and security of the transported cargo at risk if multiple drivers are involved in a single haulage.

As an alternative to truck driver base and relay systems, countries such as Uganda and South Sudan are reportedly considering to let foreign drivers enter their territory but limit their journeys to a predetermined set of routes. However, measures like this could still increase overall transport times due to rising congestion along available routes and border checkpoints. Beyond COVID-19 risks, cargo flows in the region could also become more vulnerable to regional disruptions such as natural disasters or political unrest if governments begin to limit transport routes.

In addition to this during the transport journey, some have warned that a permanent increase in transport times would also result in more congestion and delays at East Africa’s major seaports in Mombasa and Dar Es Salaam. As the time for round trips increases, cargo will need to be stored in warehouses longer than usual, a trend expected to escalate notably if delays persist for a longer period of time. Longer storage times are not only expected to raise warehouse costs, but may cause handling delays at the ports as well if not enough storage is available to unload vessels at their current rate.

PATCHWORK OF RESTRICTIONS LIKELY TO REMAIN IN PLACE AS COVID-19 FEARS PERSIST

In response to the growing number of restrictions, the East African Community (EAC) released new guidelines in April highlighting ways to facilitate cross-border movement of cargo amid the COVID-19 crisis. Several national governments have also entered discussions to better coordinate restrictions across borders to minimize disruptions to cargo movement while keeping the spread of COVID-19 at bay. However, the initiative has not yet resulted in a coordinated regional approach.

Given the vulnerability of health systems in Africa and the grave consequences experts expect bigger COVID-19 setbacks to have on the continent, the risk of new truck driving restrictions to be imposed somewhere along the region’s major transport corridors on short notice is likely to persist for the foreseeable future. Moreover, those doing business in the region have a variety of tools at their disposal to mitigate current or future disruptions to their regional supply chains.

Organizations should proactively monitor social, economic, and political developments across East Africa to spot early warning signs of upcoming restrictions. Many of the current or former measures were imposed as a result of mounting political and social pressure, which is regularly covered in regional news media. If supply chains are already affected by existing measures, managers should get in touch with their transport partners on the ground to re-align transport schedules and accommodate longer journey times where necessary. Alternatively, supply chain managers can also consider recruiting their cargo at different entry points on the continent not disrupted by restrictions yet, and move goods by road to their destinations in the interim. Lastly, changing the mode of transport from road to rail, or to air once flight schedules resume, may also provide a way to sidestep restrictions on road transport in East Africa.
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