A top official of the International Air Transport Association, IATA, has disclosed that African airlines have to brace for economic losses in the wake of the coronavirus outbreak.

Raphael Kuuchi, Vice President of IATA Africa said preliminary estimates showed that airlines risk losing about 400 million dollars from flight cancellation and suspension to and from China alone. The global impact of coronavirus outbreak on air transport is estimated at $26 billion.

Almost all African airlines except Ethiopian suspended operations of their China route in the wake of the epidemic. The IATA said the estimates are preliminary and conservative, valid as of mid-February 2020.

“The preliminary estimates that IATA came up with indicates that African airlines risk losing about $400m on conservative estimates. This is just based on the impact of China,” Kuuchi told BBC Africa.

Asked about the decision by airlines to continue operations to other parts of the world, the official said, airlines were only adhering to WHO guidelines on the movement of persons as it manages the outbreak as it has in other instances.

“The airline industry takes its guidelines from the World Health Organization, WHO, and WHO has advised against canceling or suspending flights (and) this is based on previous experience of similar viruses.

“Whenever we have epidemics of this nature and you suspend flights, you actually curtail the efforts to fight the pandemic. So currently, WHO is encouraging airlines to continue to operate but taking into consideration measures that it has outlined for airlines and passengers to adhere to,” he stressed.