

Pompeo says US has started work to set up consulate in Western Sahara

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1608837967660971100

Thu, 2020-12-24 19:21

WASHINGTON: The US State Department said on Thursday it began the process to set up a US consulate in Western Sahara, after President Donald Trump's administration this month recognized Morocco's sovereignty over the region. In a departure from longstanding US policy, Washington agreed to recognize Morocco's sovereignty over the Western Sahara, a desert region where a decades-old territorial dispute has pitted Morocco against the Algeria-backed Polisario Front, a breakaway movement that seeks to establish an independent state.

The recognition was part of a US-brokered deal in which Morocco became the fourth Arab country after the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Sudan to normalize ties with Israel in the past four months.

"Effective immediately, we are inaugurating a virtual presence post for Western Sahara, with a focus on promoting economic and social development, to be followed soon by a fully functioning consulate," US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in a statement.

"This virtual presence post will be managed by the US Embassy in Rabat," Pompeo said, adding that Washington would be continuing to support political negotiations to resolve the issues between Morocco and the Polisario within the framework of Morocco's autonomy plan.

Washington's support for Moroccan sovereignty over the desert territory represents the biggest policy concession the United States has made so far in its quest to win Arab recognition of Israel.

The series of normalization deals have been driven in part by US-led efforts to present a united front against Iran and roll back Tehran's regional influence.

President-elect Joe Biden, due to succeed Trump on Jan. 20, will face a decision whether to accept the US deal on the Western Sahara, which no other Western nation has done. Western nations and the UN have long called for a referendum to resolve the dispute.



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US adopts map of Morocco that includes Western Sahara 'Foreign maneuvers' in West Sahara destabilizing Algeria: PM

COVID-19 could 'easily overwhelm' **Yemen's health system, warns official**

Author:

Thu, 2020-12-24 22:25

Al-Mukalla: COVID-19 could "easily overwhelm" Yemen's health system and tougher measures could be re-imposed to stop transmission of the disease, an official said Thursday.

Dr. Ishraq Al-Subaee, a spokeswoman for the Aden-based National Coronavirus Committee, said the body had alerted all of the country's air, sea and land entry points about negative PCR test requirements for travelers to Yemen to be implemented from Friday.

The committee may also suggest imposing harsher measures, including closing airports and border crossings if the disease spread in the country.

"This is an easily transmissible disease that can overwhelm Yemen's health system. There are still shortages of ventilators and other important equipment," she told Arab News, adding that the country could re-impose a lockdown and ban gatherings to stop transmission.

In its latest bulletin on Monday, the committee announced recording zero confirmed cases or deaths in government-controlled provinces. The total number of confirmed cases since April 10 is 2,087, including 1,384 recoveries. But local media reports said that several new cases had been detected in Aden and the central province of Al-Bayda.

Local health officials and experts previously told Arab News that the pandemic had reached all parts of the country and the number of cases was much higher than official figures.

Yemen shut its borders and airports in March and imposed a 24-hour lockdown on some cities to stem the spread of the virus. Yemenis have, however, largely flouted health guidelines by taking part in large gatherings, arranging funerals and weddings and travelling around the country.

Despite demanding more funds and equipment to help the country's health system prepare for a new strain, Al-Subaee said that medical workers were more experienced on dealing with the pandemic than when the virus first hit the country.

"This time we are more prepared than before in terms of training and skills. Medical workers can now cope with any new shock."

Critics and experts argued that the latest measures would not curb the spread of the new variant as travellers would continue arriving in the country. Thousands of African migrants have crossed into Yemen since January despite the conflict and pandemic.

The committee's latest decision sparked panic among Yemenis abroad, who saw it as a prelude to shutting down borders. People rushed to travel agencies and the offices of national carrier Yemenia in Cairo and other cities to change their departure to earlier dates, a travel agency worker told Arab News.

Thousands of Yemenis abroad were stranded in April due to coronavirus lockdowns.

Local medical workers have told Arab News of a sharp decrease in the number of coronavirus cases, mainly in densely populated cities with daily updates at zero cases.

Dr. Ahmed Mansour, a spokesman for the National Coronavirus Committee in the southern city of Taiz, said that local PCR labs in the city had recorded zero confirmed cases despite testing hundreds of people since September.

"We take daily almost 30 samples of people who gather outside the passport department since they come from Taiz and other provinces. Results are all negative. Tests also showed that even the new variant of the virus has not arrived in Taiz," he said.

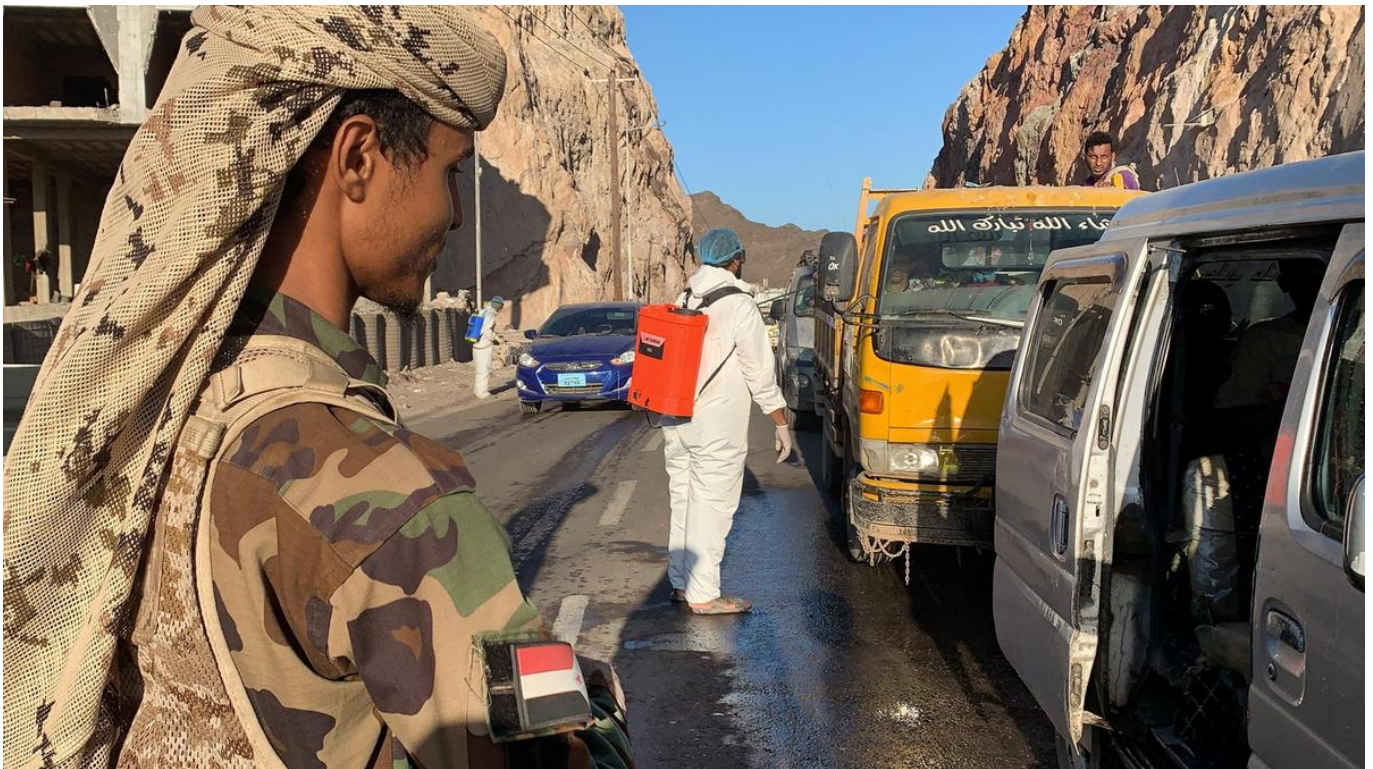
He called for the Yemeni government and international donors to provide health and quarantine facilities in Taiz with personal protective equipment and testing kits.

"We are still in need of medical equipment and protective equipment for coronavirus."

Earlier in the week, Prime Minister Maeen Abdul Malik Saeed said that the new government would ask the World Bank and international donors to fund COVID-19 vaccine shipments to Yemen because the country was unable to buy the jab.

He said that the new health minister and authorities would contact international donors about getting funds for vaccine distribution.

"We need support from the international community with regard to vaccines," the prime minister added.



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Saudi Ministry of Culture to preserve Yemeni cultural heritageYemen to require COVID-19 test for travelers into the country

Gaza Christians face canceled Christmas amid pandemic

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1608753953854258800

Wed, 2020-12-23 23:05

GAZA CITY: Nasr Al-Jaldah and his fellow Christians living in Gaza face a canceled Christmas mass as the coronavirus pandemic hits the small enclave's churches.

The celebration usually offers a brief respite for Christian Palestinians living under an Israeli blockade that stops them traveling outside the territory to see family or from taking part in celebrations in Bethlehem in the occupied West bank.

Coronavirus cases have rapidly increased in recent weeks in Gaza, with its Hamas rulers imposing tough restrictions. As Israel trumpets the start of an inoculation campaign, Palestinian leaders in both Gaza and the West Bank have been left scrambling to secure vaccines.

The church in Gaza will broadcast the mass directly online for people confined to their homes after the authorities stopped all gatherings, but it is little consolation for the small Christian community

"After years of conquering the Israeli blockade, coronavirus comes to increase our worries and kill our joy of the holiday," Al-Jaldah told Arab News. "The atmosphere does not help with joy and celebration," he added.

He said that while he had decorated and put lights on his Christmas tree in his home in the Zeitoun neighborhood of Gaza City, he did not feel the usual joys of the holiday season.

The last count by the YMCA in 2014 found fewer than 1,100 Christians living in the Gaza Strip, among a population of 2 million. Their numbers have steadily declined from the 6,000 recorded in the 1960s, before Israel occupied the territory.

Since Israel imposed a siege on Gaza after it was taken over by Hamas in 2007, Christians there have suffered a series of military and humanitarian crises along with the Muslim majority.

"A Christian is a Palestinian citizen, and he receives what is attained by everyone, and we are all in one boat," Al-Jaldah said. "We share the joys and sorrows. The siege, wars and even coronavirus do not differentiate between a Muslim and a Christian."

Israel's siege includes severe restrictions on the movement of Palestinians out of the Gaza Strip.

For nine years, Israel has prevented Al-Jaldah, 61, from obtaining a permit to travel.

He has been banned from celebrating Christmas in Bethlehem, but he was dealt an even more bitter blow five years ago when he was declined permission to see his daughter and grandson at their home in Ramallah in the West Bank. He has still not seen his grandson since he was born.

"Every year Israel deliberately kills our joy on Christmas, and coronavirus came to eliminate any appearances and rituals for the feast," he said.

"What is the value of the feast other than the mass and celebrations inside the church and the lighting of the tree, without the exchange of congratulations and visits with family and friends," Al-Jaldah, said, his voice tinged with sadness.

During the past year, Israel granted his wife and two of his children permits to pass through the Erez checkpoint, but prevented him and his third son from doing the same. "How can a separated family rejoice?" He said.

"My daughter lives in Ramallah alongside my sister, and my brother lives in Jaffa, and we are in Gaza, and we cannot see each other for many years, as if we live in planets isolated from each other."

George Anton, an activist in the Church of the Latin Monastery in Gaza, said the festive celebrations for this year would be limited to the clergy residing in the church.

The church has urged everyone to celebrate at home to avoid a coronavirus outbreak, Anton said.

"We regret that the situation has reached this state due to the outbreak of the pandemic, which kidnapped the souls of the innocent and deprived us of celebrating the Lord Christ and practicing our religious rituals in the places where the feet of Christ came.

"Christians are an integral part of the Palestinian people. They suffer their suffering and rejoice in their joy, and the Christian has no suffering of its own.

"I am a Palestinian citizen residing in Gaza and carry its identity and concerns. I live under war and suffer from the siege as everyone else does, and Israel practices all forms of oppression against us as Palestinians without discrimination in religion, gender or color.

"Israel violates the rights of Gaza Christians to practice their religious rights and access the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, as well as violating the right of Muslim brothers to reach the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, in a flagrant violation of international covenants that guarantees for all the freedom of belief, embrace of religion and practice of rituals,"

said Anton.





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Virus, Israeli occupation shatter Bethlehem's Christmas festivities
Christmas opens new market for small Gaza sewing business

Hariri pours cold water on Lebanon govt hopes

Author:

Wed, 2020-12-23 22:40

BEIRUT: Hopes that Lebanon would have a new government before the end of the year have been dashed with Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri warning of "clear complications hindering the birth of the new leadership."

Speaking on Wednesday after his 14th meeting with President Michel Aoun, Hariri said that despite attempts to halt Lebanon's collapse, "the existing political problems are clear."

He added: "We must be humble and think about the country's interests. A government must be formed after the new year."

The caretaker prime minister addressed the Lebanese people, saying: "Do not let anyone tell you that we cannot stop the current collapse, but President Aoun and I need a government of specialists and experts who know what they are doing, without being politicized."

He added: "We want people who tell us 'no' when we are wrong. We want people who can actually benefit the country, so that we can carry out the reforms we want."

Hariri said that trust between Lebanon's political parties needed to be rebuilt, but warned "there is no time left – the country is rapidly collapsing."

After a previous meeting with Aoun, Hariri was hopeful of forming a government before Christmas, saying "there is positivity and great openness."

However, leaks in the lead-up to Wednesday's meeting showed there was still a dispute over the interior, justice and energy ministries, which the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) insists on controlling as part of a political deal to break the government deadlock.

International pressure, especially from France, to form a government committed to reform has failed to end the stalemate.

Sources close to Hariri told Arab News that Aoun was "responsive" to the prime minister's suggestions, "but there are those who interfered and

overturned this response.”

Future bloc deputy Mohammed Al-Hajjar said: “It is Gebran Bassil (FPM president). He does not want to see Hariri heading a government of specialists.”

Former prime ministers met with Hariri before his Republican Palace visit and agreed to push on with the French initiative to form a government without links to the parties in power.

The political impasse raises fears over Lebanon’s growing poverty levels, with the number of poor likely to exceed half the population by 2021.

Lebanese people fear the start of the new year in light of talks about harsh measures needed to support basic materials subsidized by the state, including fuel, flour and medicine.

FPM deputy Alain Aoun said: “There has been no decision yet regarding the government. There are many unresolved issues. No team will waiver in favor of the other.”

Independent MP Jihad Al-Samad said: “There are 53 laws relating to the reform process, workflow regulations, and performance of ministries and official departments. These are locked in officials’ drawers and are not being applied. How can reform take place without applying the existing laws and provisions?”

Ghazi Wazni, the caretaker finance minister, said on Wednesday that banking secrecy will be lifted for a year and consultants Alvarez & Marsal asked to resume its financial audit of the central bank, ministries and public institutions.

The firm withdrew from the investigation on Nov. 20, saying it “did not obtain sufficient information to initiate the audit.”

At the time the central bank invoked secrecy laws on cash, credit and banking to avoid providing the required information.



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Lebanon to ask consultants to resume central bank auditLebanon to get first batch of COVID-19 vaccines in two months, minister says

[Erdogan's oil ship in eastern Med until June](#)

Author:

Wed, 2020-12-23 22:13

ANKARA: Recep Tayyip Erdogan has authorized controversial oil exploration by a survey vessel in the eastern Mediterranean for a further six months, until June next year.

The Turkish president has also obtained parliamentary approval for troop deployment in Libya for another 18 months, after his ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and its allies outvoted the opposition.

The survey vessel Oruc Reis will now continue searching for oil and gas in territorial waters claimed by Greece and Cyprus, in a move that will infuriate the EU.

Last month, EU leaders committed to limited sanctions on Turkish individuals but suspended more serious steps until March, while Greece has demanded an

arms embargo on Turkey.

In Libya, after a pact on military cooperation between Ankara and Tripoli in 2019, Turkey sent its troops there on a year-long mandate in January. Turkey recently appointed Kenan Yilmaz, a bureaucrat who was involved in the Libyan talks from the outset, as the new ambassador to Tripoli.

"Turkey extended its deployment in Libya because the Turkish government knows there is rapidly increasing cooperation between Greece and regional allies such as Egypt and Israel, as well as the UAE and France," said Evangelos D. Kokkinos, a geopolitical expert in Athens.

He told Arab News that Erdogan was trying to raise tensions abroad to maintain his influence inside Turkey. However, a full-scale war would come at a political cost to Erdogan, meaning a military standoff between Greece and Turkey was likely.

"Greece will keep on pressuring the EU for an arms embargo and sanctions against Turkey, and not just against Turkish individuals. A large force of the Greek Navy has been deployed across Greek borders and will defend Greek sovereignty, no matter the cost," he said.

Greek defense agreements with the UAE and Egypt would deter military escalation in the region, he said.

Seth J. Frantzman, executive director of the Middle East Center for Reporting and Analysis, told Arab News that Ankara's recent decisions about extension of deployment terms were unsurprising.

"Turkey intends to stay in Libya for the long term," he said. "The goal of Ankara is to create facts on the ground in Libya, Syria, Somalia, Qatar, and other states to justify its involvement and keep up pressure on countries it views as enemies, such as Egypt."

Frantzman said such a move gave Ankara leverage over the Mediterranean and the chance to continue to threaten to blackmail countries such as Greece, Egypt, and Israel every time it needed a distraction or some new chest-beating populist cause to claim it was challenging other countries.



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Turkey hopes to turn new page with US and EU in 2021, Erdogan says903 minors among thousands tried or jailed for insulting Turkey's ruler Erdogan