

Virus lockdown brings new misery to long-suffering Gaza

Author:

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GAZA CITY: Ahmed Eissa, a father of two living in the Gaza Strip, was already struggling to make ends meet on \$7 a day, dealing with frequent electricity cuts and worried that another war might break out.

Then the coronavirus found its way into the impoverished Palestinian territory, just as Israel was tightening its blockade in a standoff with Gaza's militant Hamas rulers, and a strict lockdown has confined everyone to their homes.

Now Eissa does not know how he will feed his family.

"I don't have savings and I don't have a job, so no one would lend me money," he said. "I won't beg from anyone."

The restrictions imposed by Hamas are aimed at averting what many fear would be an even bigger catastrophe: A wide-scale outbreak in a population of 2 million people confined to a territory where the health care system has been devastated by years of war and isolation.

The lockdown was triggered by the discovery earlier this week of the first locally spread cases, after months in which infections were confined to quarantine facilities where all returning travelers were forced to isolate for three weeks. Authorities have not yet determined how the virus made its way into the general population.

Targeting Hamas military infrastructure, Israel sealed off Gaza's fishing zone and closed its sole commercial crossing. That forced Gaza's only power plant to shut down for lack of fuel.

Most Gazans now get just four hours of electricity a day, leaving them without refrigeration, air conditioning or electric fans for hours on end as temperatures hover around 32 degrees Celsius.

Eissa's wife, Majda, says it's "unbearable." They struggle to sleep at night because of the heat and humidity. Her daughters sleep on the tile floor because it's cooler. They change rooms, they open and close windows, trying to catch the occasional breeze.

The water pump in their building runs on electricity, so the taps run dry when the power goes out.

"The dishes and laundry are piling up in the kitchen," she said. "Everything gets dirty, and I have to keep scrubbing and cleaning using a bottle of water. I can't bear to stay at home anymore."

Eissa used to buy from fishermen and then resell the fish in local markets, work that he says brought in around 25 shekels (\$7) a day. But the fishermen are marooned by the Israeli closures, and he's not allowed to leave home because of the lockdown to look for other work.

On Thursday, his parents, who live downstairs, sent him a pot of stew for lunch.

"I don't know what or how we will eat tomorrow," he told The Associated Press by phone from his home in the Nusseirat refugee camp in central Gaza. He complained that he has not seen a serious government plan on how to cope with

the crisis.

SPEEDREAD

The restrictions imposed are aimed at averting what many fear would be an even bigger calamity: A wide-scale outbreak in a population of 2 million people confined to a territory where the health care system has been devastated by years of war and isolation.

In recent days, authorities have detected 80 cases of local transmission and two people have died from COVID-19, the illness caused by the virus. Hamas has extended the lockdown until Sunday, forcing most businesses to close and setting up checkpoints to limit movement.

“We may have to shut down entire neighborhoods and lock up residents in their houses while providing them with what they need,” Tawfiq Abu Naim, the head of Hamas’ security services, told reporters.

Many Gazans live day-to-day on meager wages earned at markets, shops, restaurants and cafes, all of which are shuttered.

About two-thirds of Gaza’s population are refugees whose families fled or were driven out during the 1948 war surrounding the creation of Israel. More than a million receive food aid from the UN agency for Palestinian refugees, but it has been forced to suspend food distribution due to the pandemic and is now providing only health care and basic sanitation.

“We are aware that food is even more critical during such a period, and are working hard on finding a modality that will allow us to resume this massive food operation in the very near future in a safe way,” said Matthias Schmale, the UNRWA director in Gaza.

UNRWA launched a program to deliver food to people’s homes in March, at the start of the global pandemic, but ended it when an initial lockdown was lifted.

The electricity crisis also poses challenges, Schmale said.

“If we’re not able to run our generators this would be a major challenge for continuing essential services, and in particular, health,” he said.



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[Iranian musician faces jail over women dancers and singers](#)

Sat, 2020-08-29 00:44

AMMAN: Iranian musician Mehdi Rajabian said he is under house arrest as he awaits trial for working with female dancers and singers, in the country's latest move to stop women artists performing.

Rajabian, 30, said he was arrested on Aug. 10 following media reports that his latest project will include women singing and the publication of a video of a woman dancing to his music – both of which can be deemed immoral under Iranian law.

Iran's Justice Ministry and the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance did not respond to requests for comment.

"Even if I go to prison hundreds of times, I need female singing in my project, I need female dance," said Rajabian, who has been jailed twice before over his music.

"Whenever I feel the need to produce this music, I will definitely produce

it. I do not censor myself," he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation via text message from the northern city of Sari where he is currently out on bail. Iran has long censored art and music and arrested hundreds of performers under vaguely defined morality laws that target women and sexual minorities, according to Human Rights Watch.

There are no laws banning women in music but religious decisions issued under Iran's Islamic rulers, who came to power in the 1979 revolution, have been used arbitrarily, said Hadi Ghaemi, executive director of Center for Human Rights in Iran.

Even if I go to prison hundreds of times, I need female singing in my project, I need female dance.

Mehdi Rajabian, Iranian musician

"The government would like to propagate ... a traditional attitude toward women's presence in public in general," he said. "It doesn't have to be about performance."

Hunger strike

The legitimacy of the Islamic republic's rulers was challenged by nationwide protests last year, sparked by fuel price hikes, which were met with a violent crackdown.

Many young Iranians are disillusioned with laws that limit women's freedom, with fines and jail terms for having their hair uncovered or for wearing clothes deemed immodest. Thousands have protested by removing their hijabs in public in online videos.

The video which led to Rajabian's latest arrest features Iranian dancer Helia Bandeh, who lives outside Iran, performing to a track from his 2019 peace album "Middle Eastern" by Sony Music, which features about 100 artists. Rajabian spent three months in solitary confinement in 2013 for propaganda against the state and in 2015 he served 2 years behind bars until he was released after a 40-day hunger strike.



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[Lebanon coronavirus cases top 15,000](#)

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Fri, 2020-08-28 18:08

BEIRUT: Lebanon passed the 15,000 mark for coronavirus cases on Friday, the health ministry said, as the country eased lockdown measures just a week after re-imposing them following pressure from businesses.

The ministry announced 676 new infections and two deaths in the past 24 hours, bringing the total number of novel coronavirus cases registered since February to 15,613, including 148 deaths.

Daily infection rates have spiked since a massive explosion at Beirut's port on August 4 that killed more than 180 people, wounded thousands and ravaged large parts of the capital.

Some 5,855 cases, or more than a third of the total, have been registered in the past 10 days alone.

Authorities on August 21 imposed a lockdown in all parts of the country except those ravaged by the blast, as well as a night-time curfew from 6 p.m. (1500 GMT) to 6 am (0300 GMT).

But they eased the restrictions on Friday after protest from the private sector, including the owners of service and tourism businesses already reeling from the country's worst economic downturn in decades.

The start of the curfew was pushed back to 10 p.m. (1900 GMT), while malls, restaurants, coffee shops and gyms were allowed to re-open.

Caretaker health minister Hamad Hassan warned on August 17 that hospitals were reaching maximum capacity to treat coronavirus patients after the blast overwhelmed health centers already stretched by the virus.

The head of a major public hospital battling coronavirus, Firass Abiad, was unimpressed by Friday's easing of preventive measures.

With a record 24-hour tally of 689 positive tests recorded a day earlier, "it is clear the objectives of the lockdown had not been reached," he said on Twitter.



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Student spearheads Syrian education drive on dangers of COVID-19

Author:

Fri, 2020-08-28 01:55

DUBAI: An engineering student is spearheading a major campaign to educate people living in Syria on the dangers of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic.

Omar Bozo, 24, has been the driving force behind the Akmha (sanitize it) initiative, set up in Damascus in mid-March to raise awareness about the virus and help prevent its spread.

Dedicated teams of students, volunteers, and physicians have been working around the clock to offer vital health services that have attracted more than 240,000 followers on the group's Facebook page alone.

Bozo moved from Saudi Arabia to Syria in 2014 and is currently studying engineering informatics at the Arab International University, located 32 kilometers from the capital.

The idea of helping his fellow citizens came about when officials announced the closure of schools, universities, and workplaces on March 14.

"We were afraid of the coronavirus and how it was affecting other countries. My friends and I did not have classes or any activities, but we had free time and we said that we could do something," he said.

The pandemic has hit Syria at a particularly difficult time, with the nation suffering serious economic stress caused by the ongoing internal war that erupted in 2011.

Bozo pointed out that the health system in Damascus was not prepared for COVID-19, a situation that has heaped pressure on already packed hospitals. In addition, a lack of polymerase chain reaction (PCR) testing has led to an inaccurate number of infections.

According to the World Health Organization, as of Aug. 16 there had been 1,593 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and 60 related deaths in Syria. However, analysts believe the numbers are likely to be much higher.

One of the Akmha collective's first outdoor activities, between March and May, involved heading out onto the streets – especially crowded places such as bus stations – to distribute hand sanitizers to passengers and passersby, place soap and usage instructions at several public water fountains, and disinfect narrow streets in selected neighborhoods.

As well as cleaning family homes, the group recently began a disinfection program at Damascus University. With the new academic year getting underway in September, launching a campaign to curb the spread of COVID-19 in schools was also in the pipeline.

Another of Bozo's and his colleagues' goals was to provide much-needed, large oxygen tanks for respiratory support, a target that has remained a challenge due to supply shortages and inflation concerns in the country.

However, thanks to donations from individuals and organizations, the team has been able to secure more than 400 refillable tanks.

A medical team has also been formed, consisting of around 20 hospital doctors who daily volunteer to man emergency phone lines, make home visits, and provide free consultations for people requiring medical assistance.

Operating from a modest center inside an old Arabic courtyard house in Damascus, the dedicated Akmha team has continued to deliver its services throughout Syria despite often being overwhelmed with requests for help.

Over time, the group has gained popularity on social media, and now has more than 240,000 followers active on its Facebook group and page, the latter of which is regularly updated with advice on COVID-19 precautionary measures and the daily activities of on-the-ground teams.

Bozo said that Syrian society was coming to terms with the grim consequences of COVID-19, with people becoming more responsible and cautionary.

"In the beginning, there was denial and conspiracy theories, but the situation has completely changed now. People who were ridiculing the virus grew afraid of it and those who mocked facemasks started wearing them.

"The main reason is because people witnessed this danger in their own homes and of others too," he added.



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[Cairo express buses' fast lane to the future](#)

Author:

Fri, 2020-08-28 01:52

CAIRO: Egypt is looking to speed up the introduction of electric and gas-powered express buses on Cairo's ring road in a bid to ease traffic congestion and reduce pollution in the capital.

The Ministry of Transport plans to run the buses in dedicated lanes, with bus stops at major intersections.

Cairo, Giza and Qalyubia have formed a joint committee to implement the so-called BRT (bus rapid transit) project and oversee its operation.

Kamel Al-Wazir, Egypt's transport minister, said the BRT buses will offer a connection between different modes of transportation.

Buses will run in their own lanes unobstructed by other traffic, an approach

similar to that adopted in other capitals.

A ministry source said the high-frequency buses will likely be introduced after expansion work on the ring road is completed.

The ministry plans to expand the ring road to include up to eight lanes in each direction.

Transport expert Magdy Essam said that ticket prices will reflect companies' operating costs and profit margins, and will not be supported by the government.

The planned buses will connect with the Cairo metro network at Adly Mansour Station in Salam in the fourth phase of the recently opened third line and the Rawd Al-Farag Corridor station in Giza in the third phase of the third metro line, Essam said.

Automotive expert Gamal Askar said the buses first appeared in the late 1970s and quickly became popular in major cities. The electric-powered vehicles can carry up to 4,000 passengers per hour.

According to Askar, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi believes the bus service will help Cairo – one of the world's worst cities for motor vehicle pollution – to improve its air quality.

Askar said that Egypt has laid more than 8,000 km of asphalt in the past six years, improving the efficiency of roads, cutting travel time and helping to reduce fuel consumption.

The ring road will include eight lanes, with two internal lanes allocated for buses, he said.

Buses will be equipped to carry passengers with special needs.

Transit time on the roads should be reduced and the waiting time for passengers will be minimal. A double bus will be able to carry about 170 passengers, he said.



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