

# Pandemic starts to surge in conflict-hit Libya

Tue, 2020-08-18 00:51

TRIPOLI/BENGHAZI: As coronavirus cases surge in Libya, medics and officials working with a health system wrecked by years of division and war are warning that the pandemic could be slipping out of their control.

The conflict has also restricted movement within Libya, and confirmed cases remained low during the first months of the outbreak. Now, infections are jumping by up to several hundred per day to reach a total of nearly 8,200, including more than 150 deaths.

Hotspots include the capital Tripoli and the large port city of Misrata in the west, and the city of Sabha in the south.

Medics say the virus is spreading because people have carried on attending large gatherings including weddings and funerals, and are not practicing physical distancing.

Ahmed Al-Hasi, spokesman for the state medical committee responsible for countering the virus in eastern Libya, said the public needed to take precautions, or else medical staff with limited resources would become overwhelmed.

"They need to know that the virus is real, the casualties are real, the deaths are real," Hasi said.

In Hay Al-Andalus, an upscale suburb of Tripoli, Mayor Mohamed Al-Fataisi told reporters the situation had become "dangerous," adding: "We are unable to contain the disease."

Nighttime curfews across the country are often not respected, and there is a requirement to wear face masks in public spaces in western Libya but not in the east. The two parts of the country are run by separate administrations. A sharp fall in living standards has anyway left many struggling to afford even minor expenses, including masks.

"People are asked to wear masks and use (sanitizing) alcohol, but no one knows that they have not been paid salaries," said Abduladeem Mohamed, a Tripoli taxi driver. "I prefer to buy bread for my children."

Libya's National Center for Disease Control, which operates across the country, could not be reached for comment.

Libya's health facilities have long been weak. But a stop-start conflict that has split the country into rival camps has destroyed or damaged some medical facilities and left others struggling to function. Frequent power cuts during summer months add to the challenges.

Rick Brennan, the World Health Organization's regional emergency director in the Middle East, said the agency had faced serious logistical constraints in Libya, including "major challenges bringing the PPE in, the testing kits."

"I think there's a reasonable understanding of what's needed, it's just having the capacities to deliver that's the problem," he said.

Marwa Abdulkader Alhudhairy, a resident of Sabha, said her 70-year-old father started developing coronavirus symptoms on July 8, but was only able to find a PCR swab test on July 23.

Despite suffering from heart problems, he self-treated at home because "he is

well aware of the lack of protective equipment and means available to deal with coronavirus,” she said.

Though he eventually recovered, “we went through very difficult moments as we almost lost him,” Alhudhairy said.

In eastern Libya, controlled by rival authorities to the internationally recognized government in Tripoli, officials fear they will be unable to cope with a surge in serious cases.

“We worry that there will come a time, and that time is not far away, when the health care system is unable to receive patients that need ventilators,” said Fadi Farag Al-Fortas, a doctor at the Benghazi Medical Center.



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## [Gaza rapper, 11, strikes chord with rhymes about war and hardship](#)

Author:

Tue, 2020-08-18 00:44

GAZA: Gaza rapper Abdel-Rahman Al-Shantti may only be 11 years old but his rhymes on war and hardship in the Palestinian enclave have reached thousands of people, conveying in English what he calls “a message of peace and humanity.”

A video of Al-Shantti rapping outside his school in Gaza City, surrounded by classmates wearing matching uniforms, has garnered hundreds of thousands of views on social media and was even shared by the popular British rapper Lowkey.

“I am here to tell you our lives are hard. We got broken streets and bombs in the yard,” go the lyrics of his song “Gaza messenger,” alluding to three devastating wars fought between Israel and Hamas.

Though Arabic is his first language, Shantti raps in fluent, unaccented English – a skill he says he honed by listening to American rappers including Eminem, Tupac and DJ Khaled.

“I want to be like Eminem – not to copy his style, I have my own style. But he is my favorite rapper, my idol,” he told Reuters in English as he wrote lyrics and composed rap beats through an app on his cellphone.

In another one of his songs, “Peace,” Al-Shantti evokes moments from a war with Israel in 2008-2009. “I was born in Gaza City, and the first thing I heard was a gunshot. In my first breath, I tasted gunpowder,” the lyrics say. Al-Shantti says he hopes to shine a light on the challenges wrought on Gaza by an Israeli-led blockade, which economists blame for soaring poverty in the coastal territory. Israel cites threats from Hamas for the restrictions.



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# Sudanese demand reforms a year after deal with generals

Author:

Tue, 2020-08-18 00:39

CAIRO: Sudanese protesters returned to the streets Monday to call for more reforms a year after a power-sharing deal between the pro-democracy movement and the generals.

Sudan is on a fragile path to democracy after a popular uprising led the military to overthrow former President Omar Bashir in April 2019. A military-civilian government now rules the country, with elections possible in late 2022.

The demonstrations were organized by local groups linked to the Sudanese Professionals' Association, which spearheaded the uprising against Bashir. The crowds, waving Sudanese flags, gathered outside the Cabinet's headquarters in Khartoum to hand over a list of demands, including the formation of a legislative body.

Police later dispersed the protesters, and footage circulating online showed demonstrators running away from tear gas. There were no immediate reports of casualties.

Organizers said the protesters were furious after Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok sent an aide to meet with them instead of coming out in person. Protesters also took to the streets in Khartoum's twin city, Omdurman, and several other cities.

Monday's protests marked a year after the generals signed a power-sharing agreement with the Forces for Declaration of Freedom and Change, a coalition of opposition parties and movements representing the protesters.

The deal created a joint civilian-military "sovereign council" to rule the country until elections and established a Cabinet appointed by the activists. A legislative body was supposed to be formed within three months but has yet to be established, and the civilian leadership has struggled to assert its authority.

## **BACKGROUND**

**Monday's protests in Sudan marked a year after the generals signed a power-sharing agreement with the Forces for Declaration of Freedom and Change.**

“The course of the revolution should be corrected,” activist Awatef Ossman said, calling the military’s presence in the government a “clear and specific obstacle.”

The protesters also called for a conference to decide how to address the country’s daunting economic challenges, the official SUNA news agency reported.

Battered by decades of US sanctions, civil war and mismanagement under Bashir, Sudan suffers from high inflation, which reached over 100 percent in recent months, a foreign debt at close to \$60 billion and widespread shortages of essential goods, including fuel, bread and medicine.

Sudan is also struggling to contain a coronavirus outbreak that has infected around 12,500 people and caused more than 800 deaths. Testing is limited, and the country’s health infrastructure is ill-equipped to cope with the pandemic.

The Sudanese economy contracted by 2.5 percent in 2019 and is projected to shrink by 8 percent in 2020, according the International Monetary Fund.



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# Oman opens tourist restaurants and swimming pools in hotels

Author:

Reuters

ID:

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CAIRO: Oman will allow as of Tuesday the reopening of tourist and international restaurants, as well as gyms and swimming pools located in hotels, under certain regulations and requirements.

Oman's ministry of tourism said on Monday that the supreme committee for dealing with COVID-19 approved the reopening.

The supreme committee had also announced the ending of the ban on night movement as of Saturday.

Oman has recorded 83,226 coronavirus cases, including 588 deaths and 77,812 recoveries.



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oman lifts lockdown as country gradually eases COVID-19 restrictions

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## [Israel renews assaults on Gaza, shuts fishing zone](#)

Mon, 2020-08-17 00:36

GAZA CITY/JERUSALEM: Israel's army launched new airstrikes on Sunday against Hamas positions in Gaza and closed the fishing zone around the Palestinian enclave in response to rockets and firebombs sent into Israeli territory. The Israeli measures came after a week of heightened tensions, including clashes on Saturday evening along the Gaza-Israeli border, the army said. Dozens of Palestinian "rioters burned tires, hurled explosive devices and grenades toward the security fence and attempted to approach it," an Israeli Army statement said.

Long simmering Palestinian anger has flared further since Israel and the UAE on Thursday agreed to normalize relations, a move Palestinians saw as a betrayal of their cause by the Gulf country.

In the days before the UAE deal was announced, Israel had carried out repeated night-time strikes on targets linked to Hamas, which controls Gaza. The army said the strikes were in response to makeshift firebombs attached to balloons and kites sent into southern Israel, causing thousands of fires. Israel said there were 19 such Palestinian attacks on Saturday alone, in addition to two rockets fired from Gaza, which were intercepted by its Iron Dome defense system.

Israel responded with strikes on several Hamas targets including "a military compound used to store rocket ammunition," the army said.

Defense Minister and alternate Prime Minister Benny Gantz charged that Hamas's refusal to stop the attacks is preventing Gazans from living "in dignity and security."

If Sderot, the southern Israel town most affected by the balloon attacks, "isn't quiet, then Gaza won't be either," Gantz said.

Sderot Mayor Alon Davidi said Israel needed to deal forcefully with "terrorists ... who try to murder us and our children."

But a durable solution also required providing better economic opportunities "to help civilians on both sides," including Palestinians in Gaza, Davidi said.

Israel also closed the Gaza Strip's offshore fishing zone on Sunday following a night of cross-border fighting with Palestinian militants, the most intense escalation of hostilities in recent months.

## FASTFACT

**A durable solution is required providing better economic opportunities 'to help civilians on both sides,' including Palestinians in Gaza, according to Sderot Mayor Alon Davidi.**

After Saturday's clashes, Israel's military decided "to entirely shut down the fishing zone of the Gaza Strip, immediately and until further notice, starting this morning (Sunday)," a military statement said.

Gaza fisherman Yasser Salah said he was out on the waters early Sunday and was "surprised" to learn from an Israeli patrol that the coastal sea area was "completely closed."

"We did nothing," said Salah. "We don't get involved in politics. We are fishermen who live off what we catch in the sea."

Israel has also closed its Kerem Shalom goods crossing with the Gaza Strip. Despite a truce last year backed by the UN, Egypt and Qatar, the two sides clash sporadically with rockets, mortar fire or incendiary balloons.

The Gaza Strip has a population of 2 million, more than half of whom live in poverty, according to the World Bank.

The IDF said Hamas "is responsible for all events transpiring in the Gaza Strip and emanating from it, and will bear the consequences for terror activity against Israeli civilians."

Dozens of Palestinians took part in the protests. The military said the protesters "burned tires, hurled explosive devices and grenades toward the security fence and attempted to approach it."

The Gaza health ministry said Israeli gunfire at protesters wounded two Palestinians.

Israel holds Hamas, the Islamist militant group ruling the Gaza Strip, responsible for all attacks emanating from the Palestinian territory. Incendiary balloons from the Gaza Strip have caused extensive damage to Israeli fields in recent days. It comes as Hamas, like other Palestinian factions, denounced the UAE for agreeing to formal ties with Israel.

Following a meeting on Sunday with the top army brass, Gantz said in a statement that Israel "will respond forcefully to any violation of sovereignty until complete quiet is restored in the south. If Sderot isn't quiet, Gaza won't be either."

Israel and Egypt have maintained a blockade of the Gaza Strip since Hamas took power in an armed coup in 2007. Israel has fought three wars with Hamas in the Gaza Strip in the years since.

The two sides have largely upheld an informal truce, and fighting has ceased almost entirely since the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic.



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