

Cairo mosque resumes Friday prayers with pandemic plea

Author:

Fri, 2020-06-05 23:29

CAIRO: Friday prayers returned to Cairo's Al-Azhar Mosque, 66 days after being suspended as a precautionary measure to prevent the spread of the coronavirus.

Ahmed Hashem, a member of the Senior Scholars Committee in Al-Azhar, was the khatib, or preacher, for the first Friday prayers since the shutdown.

Only 20 worshippers from among the mosque's imams and employees took part in the prayers. Regular worshippers were absent in line with virus restrictions.

"To all those working in the medical force, from doctors to nurses, work sincerely and know that in your work of treating the sick, you are conducting the best form of worship," Hashem said during his sermon, addressing health-care workers.

"What we experienced with this pandemic, and being unable to find a cure despite the genius of modern science, is an indication that this universe has God," he added.

The Friday prayer was broadcast on Egyptian TV and on Al-Azhar's social media platforms.

Hashem told journalists earlier that praying in Al-Azhar Mosque was a good omen, saying he prayed to God to "lift the pandemic off humanity as a whole."

A member of the Council of Senior Religious Scholars said that it was common knowledge among scholars that in Al-Azhar Mosque, prayers are answered.

Shoukry El-Gendy, undersecretary of the Religious Affairs Committee in Parliament, said the return of prayers in mosques will depend on worshippers following social distancing, especially in large venues.

Egypt's mosques will follow protective guidelines when they reopen, with worshippers wearing face masks, keeping a safe distance and each having their own prayer mat.

The Friday prayers were the first to be held in Al-Azhar Mosque since the Grand Imam Ahmed Al-Tayyeb, sheikh of Al-Azhar, temporarily stopped public prayers on March 21 to help prevent the spread of the coronavirus.

The Ministry of Endowments confirmed that the next Friday prayer, on June 12, will be held in the Imam Hussein Mosque, and will include around 20 mosque employees and endowment workers.

The ministry would not provide any information on when daily prayers will be

held in mosques across Egypt.

The Council of Ministers said that a coronavirus crisis management committee meeting next week will make a decision on the reopening of mosques. The committee is responsible for ensuring that government instructions on the virus are being implemented.

This was not the first time Al-Azhar Mosque stopped worshippers congregating. During the era of the Ayyubid state (1174-1250 AD), Salah Al-Din Al-Ayyubi overthrew the Fatimids at a time when the mosque was neglected.

During the rule of Egypt's Ayyubid dynasty, Sadr Al-Din bin Derbas, a judge appointed by Salah Al-Din Al-Ayyubi, was prohibited from praying in it. Al-Hakim Mosque became the only mosque in which congregational prayers, including the Friday prayer and khutbah, took place.



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Crackdown on Turkish opposition accelerates: Sign of a snap election?

Author:

Fri, 2020-06-05 23:20

ISTANBUL: Three opposition MPs in Turkey were expelled from office on Thursday night and detained on espionage and terrorism charges in a move many see as being designed to weaken opposition parties ahead of a likely snap election.

Enis Berberoglu, from the main opposition Republican People's party (CHP), and Leyla Guven and Musa Farisiogullari from the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) were all expelled, thus losing their parliamentary immunity. Berberoglu was arrested at his home in Istanbul during the night, while the two HDP MPs were arrested in the southeastern city of Diyarbakir.

Opposition MPs reportedly chanted slogans calling the ruling government fascist, "putschist," and "the enemy of democracy."

"This is yet another sign that the Islamist-nationalist coalition ruling President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's presidency will harden its authoritarianism as it continues to lose democratic legitimacy," Murat Somer, a political scientist from Koc University in Istanbul, told Arab News. "It tries to kill three birds with one stone."

CHP MP Berberoglu, a journalist, was sentenced to five years and 10 months in prison in 2018 for providing another journalist with footage that appeared to show that the National Intelligence Agency was providing arms to Syrian rebels in 2014. His sentence was on hold because of his parliamentary immunity.

The HDP parliamentarians have been charged with "membership of a terrorist organization" because of their alleged links to the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Earlier this week, the HDP asked for an official probe into the cost of Turkey's involvement in the Libyan conflict and urged the government to focus on dealing with domestic issues.

The government's increasing crackdown on opposition parties is a result of its waning power domestically – where it faces an unprecedented economic crisis and rising unemployment – Somer and others suggest.

According to Somer, the latest arrests are not only an attempt to restrict democratic opposition by criminalizing it but also to drive a wedge between pro-Kurdish opposition parties and the rest. They are also a warning to potential dissidents inside the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP).

"All this is yet another step in the ongoing struggle between those who want to consolidate an authoritarian presidential system and a still-divided yet dynamic opposition (aiming) to revive democracy," he said.

The crackdown on the HDP is expected to push the pro-Kurdish party to adopt a more radical standpoint that could make any electoral alliance difficult to sell to CHP voters.

Alpay Antmen, an attorney and a CHP MP, said the arrests are intended to shift people's focus away from Turkey's economic turmoil and the fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic. Members of the main opposition party were about to launch a campaign across 19 of Turkey's hardest-hit cities to listen to the views of local citizens.

"The ruling government tries to restrict the opposition parties' efforts to reach out to the citizens and to help them recover (financially). But whatever they do, it gives us further enthusiasm for our nationwide projects," Antmen told Arab News.

Director of Human Rights Watch Turkey Emma Sinclair-Webb also criticized the move, describing it as "another sign of the relentless assault on elected opposition parties," and added that the three lawmakers had been subjected to "politically motivated trials in which legal activities were criminalized."



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[Egypt agrees on \\$5.2 bn aid package: IMF](#)

Fri, 2020-06-05 22:51

WASHINGTON: An IMF team has agreed on a one-year, \$5.2 billion financing package for Egypt to help the country alleviate the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the fund announced Friday.

The IMF board must still approve the financing from the fund's Rapid Financing Instrument (RFI), which allows nations to circumvent the lengthy negotiations usually needed to secure a full economic assistance program – time most countries do not have as they struggle to cope with the coronavirus crisis.



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Houthis accused of leaving thousands of Yemenis to die from COVID-19

Author:

Thu, 2020-06-04 23:47

LONDON: The Houthis are leaving thousands of Yemeni COVID-19 patients in Sanaa and other areas under their control to die of the disease, the country's information minister said on Thursday.

With its health services decimated by years of conflict, experts have warned that Yemen could face one of the worst outbreaks of the coronavirus disease. The Iran-backed Houthis have been accused of covering up the extent of the outbreak in the territory under its control and of hampering aid operations. Yemeni citizens who have the virus or are suspected of having it are staying at home out of fear they will be killed in hospital by "lethal injections" administered by Houthis, Information Minister Moammar Al-Eryani said.

Meanwhile, the Houthis have set up a field hospital in Sanaa's Movenpick Hotel for its leaders and members who have the coronavirus. The militia have equipped the facility with respirators and medical equipment.

They are also monopolising graves for their members in Sanaa's city center, Al-Eryani said.

Field reports obtained by the Yemeni authorities reveal that hundreds of citizens have died from the coronavirus and thousands have been infected with it, Al-Eryani said.

He called on the United Nations, the World Health Organization and the international community to condemn these crimes and pressure the Houthis to be transparent about the spread of the disease.



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Yemen government calls for investigation into journalist's killing
Houthis reject Yemeni government offer to cooperate against COVID-19

[Syria says Israeli jets flying over Lebanon raid military base in Hama province](#)

Author:

Reuters

ID:

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Thu, 2020-06-04 19:46

AMMAN: Syria state media said Thursday Israeli jets flying over Lebanon hit military targets in northwestern Hama province causing only material damage, in Israel's latest escalation of raids in the last few months.

Earlier state media said Syrian army air defenses thwarted an unidentified missile attack on a city in northwestern Hama province, state media said on Thursday.

The news flash on state television said the missiles hit the outskirts of Misyaf city. Israel has in the last two months stepped up its strikes on suspected Iranian targets inside Syria.

Asked about the missile attack, an Israeli military spokeswoman declined comment.

Western intelligence sources said Israel had escalated raids in Syria at a time when world is distracted by the coronavirus pandemic.

Iranian-backed militias have long been entrenched near Misyaf where they have bases, part of a growing presence across government-controlled Syria, they added.

Israel has acknowledged it has conducted many raids inside Syria since the start of the civil war in 2011 where it views Iranian presence as a strategic threat.



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