

WHO denies Houthi 'faulty testing kit' claims

Author:

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AL-MUKALLA: The World Health Organization (WHO) office in Yemen has rejected a claim by Iran-backed Houthis that COVID-19 test kits provided by the organization are faulty and hampered their efforts to declare an accurate number of infections in their territories.

In a statement seen by Arab News, the WHO said that the kits were made in Germany and have been used in 120 countries.

"The batch of almost 7,000 COVID-19 test kits provided to Yemen by the WHO are the same PCR test kits provided to over 120 countries. An estimated 2 million of these kits were manufactured by TIB Molbiol, a company based in Germany," the statement said.

Under local and international pressure to disclose accurate information about the pandemic in their territories, Houthi Health Minister Taha Al-Mutwakel said in a press conference on May 30 that one reason they did not reveal the number of infections in areas under their control was faulty testing kits that returned false positive results on non-human samples.

The WHO said: "The PCR test kits manufactured by TIB Molbiol met ISO standards for quality manufacturing. The kits were tested and validated by three external laboratories, and the validation results were published in a peer-reviewed journal."

Despite ruling the most densely populated areas in Yemen, including the capital Sanaa, the Houthis have reported only two deaths and two recoveries.

In less-populated liberated provinces, the Aden-based National Coronavirus Committee reported on Tuesday 45 new coronavirus cases, including three deaths, bringing the total number of cases to 399, including 86 deaths and 15 recoveries.

Speaking at the virtual donors conference hosted by Saudi Arabia on Tuesday, Yemeni Prime Minister Maeen Abdulmalik Saeed said the Houthis have suppressed information about the pandemic, and intimidated Yemeni doctors and relatives of coronavirus patients who might speak out about their ordeal.

"The Houthis have rejected and disregarded all our initiatives for working together to fight the pandemic," Saeed said.

In Aden, Dr. Ishraq Al-Subaee, a spokesman for the National Coronavirus Committee, told Arab News on Wednesday that there is no direct communication between the committee and Houthi health authorities.

"There is indirect cooperation through international agencies. There is great

secrecy about the scale of the pandemic inside Houthi-controlled areas," she said.

Suppression

Ironically, when the Houthi health chief was boasting about the health-care facilities and accusing the WHO of wrongdoing, a Houthi militia official was using social media to appeal for help after developing symptoms of COVID-19.

Ahmed Al-Hubaishi, a media adviser to the Houthi Supreme Political Council, wrote on Twitter, urging Houthi officials to send a medical team to his house. "I suffer from acute and intermittent fever, dry and severe coughing, and difficulty breathing," he said.

Al-Hubaishi died on Wednesday of the virus. But instead of saying his father died of coronavirus based on his post, Al-Hubaishi's son deleted his father's old posts about his illness and said that he had died of diabetes, another indication of pressure on the families of infected people, experts said.

At the same time, new amateur videos posted on social media showed health workers in white protective clothing burying victims of COVID-19 in Sanaa and other northern provinces.

Confirmed images also show a notice from Houthis outside a closed cemetery in Sanaa, saying the cemetery was full.

Experts in Yemen believe that the health situation in Sanaa and other areas under Houthi control is dire, despite their efforts to suppress information about deaths and infections.

Ali Al-Fakih, editor of Al-Masdar Online, whose news site extensively covered COVID-19 deaths in Houthi areas, told Arab News that he had documented the deaths of at least 30 doctors since early May.

"They suppress information about the pandemic because they want life to continue as it is. The disruption of life would have an impact on their mobilization and recruitment efforts," he said, adding that many COVID-19 patients prefer to isolate themselves at home to avoid Houthi harassment.

Al-Subaee said that her colleagues in different health facilities in Sanaa told her they receive more than 100 new virus cases every day.

"The infection has spread through society. Doctors in our Whatsapp group say that Kuwait hospital alone receives 90 coronavirus patients in 24 hours," she said.



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Houthis reject Yemeni government offer to cooperate against COVID-19\$1.35bn raised for Yemen in virtual donors conference hosted by Saudi Arabia, UN

[France, Algeria pledge to relaunch relations after rift](#)

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Wed, 2020-06-03 14:58

ALGIERS: The French and Algerian presidents have pledged to “relaunch” relations after a week-long diplomatic rift that led to the recall of the Algerian ambassador to Paris.

French President Emmanuel Macron spoke by phone Tuesday with his Algerian counterpart Abdelmadjid Tebboune, discussing the coronavirus crisis and conflicts in Libya and the Sahel, said the Elysee Palace.

They spoke “in a spirit of friendship” and “mutual respect for the others’ sovereignty” and “affirmed their willingness to work together for the stability and security of the region,” it said.

“They also agreed to work toward a peaceful relationship and an ambitious relaunch of bilateral cooperation in all areas.”

Algeria said both sides agreed to “give a positive boost” to relations “on a sustainable foundation capable of guaranteeing mutual common interest and full respect for the distinctiveness and sovereignty of each of the two countries.”

The phone talk appeared to put an end to a diplomatic crisis triggered by the broadcast on French television of documentaries on the “Hirak” anti-government protest movement in Algeria.

Algiers had recalled its ambassador in Paris, Salah Lebdioui, for consultations, denouncing one of the films for “attacks on the Algerian people and its institutions,” including the army.

Earlier in the year, Tebboune had called for “mutual respect” in Franco-Algerian relations, saying his country “will not accept any interference or tutelage” from abroad.

The leaders agreed to coordinate on working to restore security and stability in the region in regards to Libya and the Sahel region, the Algerian statement added.

Algeria’s neighbor Libya has been mired in conflict since the 2011 ouster of dictator Muammar Qaddafi, with two rival administrations and multiple militias currently struggling for power.

France and five Sahel nations – including three of Algeria’s immediate neighbors – pledged earlier this year to bolster efforts against jihadists waging an increasingly deadly insurgency.



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[No children, no toilets: Egypt sets out mosque reopening rules](#)

Author:

Wed, 2020-06-03 20:18

CAIRO: Banning children, wearing face masks and closing toilets are some of the rules that Egypt's mosques must follow during the coronavirus pandemic, as a parliamentary committee on Wednesday discussed plans to welcome back worshippers.

A number of members from the Committee of Religious Affairs and Endowments backed the Ministry of Awqaf's plan to open mosques on the condition that the Ministry of Health confirmed that the virus no longer posed a threat.

"By opening up all mosques we are contributing to less crowding in mosques, because if we open only a percentage of the mosques in the country, it will increase the number of worshippers who visit them, instead of having them spread throughout the many mosques in the country," committee secretary Omar Hamroush said. "It is better to have all mosques operating while taking the necessary precautions and preventive measures to prevent the spread of the virus." He emphasized the need to clean and disinfect mosques after each of the five daily prayers.

Should the Ministry of Health give the green light then mosques, which were sealed off in March in the wake of the outbreak, will accept worshippers but they will be expected to follow regulations announced by the Minister of Religious Endowments Mohamed Mokhtar Gomaa.

They include wearing a protective face mask at all times, keeping a safe distance between rows of worshippers and for each person to have their own prayer mat. Toilets and ablution areas will be closed and there will be a limit to the amount of time spent in the mosque. Children will not be allowed in.

The Ministry of Awqaf's plan also includes a system for arranging worshippers. There is to be a minimum of 1.5 meters between each person and the same distance between each row of people.

Committee undersecretary, Shoukry El-Gendy, supported the ministry's plans for reopening mosques and smaller places of worship – zawiyas – and the proposed precautionary measures. But he added that much depended on the congregations themselves.

"We are counting on the cooperation of worshippers and mosque goers," he said.

He added that people's concerns about crowding would be allayed as they could go to mosque in shifts rather than everyone heading there at the same time. The decision to open mosques has not yet been broached by the Egyptian government as discussions have been limited to the ministry and parliament. Some fear that opening mosques too soon may contribute to the spread of the virus.

Dr. Abdel-Samie Ahmed, who has been working in a quarantine hospital, told Arab News that any decision to open up mosques must be studied carefully according to instructions issued by the Ministry of Health and the World Health Organization, taking into account the increasing number of coronavirus cases in Egypt during the past few days.

As of Wednesday, the virus had killed 1,052 and infected 27,536.

Ahmed said that if mosques were open then zawiya must be excluded from the decision, especially because of their limited space and a lack of proper ventilation.



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High diabetes and obesity rates complicate GCC's coronavirus fight

Tue, 2020-06-02 21:53

DUBAI: In the ongoing havoc the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is wreaking, a double bind has the Gulf region's health experts worried – the rising cases of diabetes and obesity and the increased risk of mortality this population faces due to the pandemic.

According to the International Diabetic Federation (IDF), more than 39 million adults aged 20 to 79 had diabetes in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region last year. The figure is estimated to increase to 108 million by 2045.

The IDF Atlas states that 15.4 percent of adults aged 20 to 79 in the UAE are diabetic, while in Bahrain the number is 19.6 percent. In Kuwait and Qatar, the figure jumps to 20 percent.

In Saudi Arabia, it is estimated that 15 percent of the adult population has diabetes, and many more are likely to be either undiagnosed or pre-diabetic, leaving them on the edge of the chronic disease.

These numbers are alarming by themselves, but what is more concerning is that amid the COVID-19 pandemic, some groups face a greater risk than others.

A study conducted by the Imperial College London found that people with Type 2 diabetes are twice as likely to die from COVID-19 as those without it.

The study also found that people with Type 1 diabetes were three and a half times more likely to die from a COVID-19 infection.

What causes such a lethal outcome? According to Dr. Nasr Al-Jafari of DNA Health Corporation, Dubai, the virus can be deadly because of its ability to stimulate a part of the immune system called the "inflammasome."

"This can often cause an uncontrolled release of pro-inflammatory responses of the immune system, which leads to what has been described as a 'cytokine storm' (where the body starts to attack its own cells instead of fighting off the invading virus). The consequences are a potentially severe and irreversible damage to the heart and lungs," Al-Jafari told Arab News.

"We also know that people suffering from both diabetes and obesity have a chronic activation of this same 'inflammasome.'

"Therefore, these people are more at risk of developing the above-described inflammatory cascade of events, ultimately putting them at a higher risk of needing ventilatory support, and even a higher risk of death."

Khadija Kapasi, a Kuwait-based clinical dietitian, says that the problem people with diabetes face is one of “worst outcomes.”

“People with co-morbidities like heart disease, diabetes and obesity have a higher chance of complications with COVID-19, and diabetics are particularly vulnerable because the virus can cause difficulties managing it,” she said.

Echoing the concerns of Al-Jafari and Kapasi, Dr. Asma Deeb, division chief of Pediatric Endocrinology at the Sheikh Shakhbout Medical City in Abu Dhabi, said that the risk of COVID-19 is expected to be high due to the wide prevalence of diabetes in the Gulf region.

“Diabetes can make COVID-19 symptoms more severe and can cause a greater likelihood of mortality,” she said, adding: “Obesity has also been identified as a risk factor.”

In addition to having diabetes, over half of diabetics in the region are reported as having at least one co-morbidity, said Kapasi. In Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, one in five are reported as having two or more co-morbidities.

“Saudi Arabia also ranks in the top 15 countries for obesity, which leads to diabetes and its complications,” Kapasi said. “The UAE, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Qatar are listed in the top 15 nations for the highest rate of diabetes per capita.”

“Diabetes is a risk factor for hospitalization and mortality of the COVID-19 infection,” Bassam Bin Abbas, professor and pediatric consultant of endocrinology at the King Faisal Specialist Hospital and Research Center in Riyadh, told Arab News.

“More than a third of the Kingdom’s adult population is obese, and obesity is also a risk factor for severe infection and diabetic complications.”

What is causing this rise in numbers? According to research from New York University Abu Dhabi, Gulf citizens may have a genetic predisposition to diabetes. But that is not the only reason.

“Experts concerned about the rapid increase in lifestyle diseases in this region have looked to history and environmental factors to identify the cause,” said Kapasi.

And the cause, according to her, is clear: “Unhealthy lifestyles and urbanization. Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE are some of the wealthiest countries in the world today, and the lifestyle of the average citizen in these countries is dramatically different from that of the pre-oil era.”

Al-Jafari describes Type 2 diabetes, which accounts for over 90 per cent of the cases, as a “lifestyle disease.”

“The modernized lifestyle adopted by a large part of the population is a perfect storm for developing ‘insulin resistance’, which is at the root of this condition,” he said.

“There is an over-availability of, and dependency on, fast foods and processed foods. The lifestyle has largely become sedentary, particularly during the hotter months.”

According to all the specialists, the need of the hour is to raise awareness among people with diabetes and offer them more education and support to manage their condition during this difficult time.

Diabetics are advised to strictly monitor their blood glucose level at regular intervals to ensure that it is under control.

“They should check not only fasting but also post-meal glucose levels, which are more likely to be higher,” said Dr. Abdul Jabbar, consultant endocrinologist, Medcare Hospital, Al Safa, Dubai.

“They should strictly adhere to their medication schedule, including for control of blood pressure and lipids. Wherever possible, patients should tele-consult with doctors to reduce exposure to the virus,” he said.

Diabetes in COVID-19 patients can also be more difficult to treat due to the fluctuations of blood glucose, concomitant sepsis, and high risk of developing diabetic ketoacidosis and multi-organ failure, said Dr Vikram Hundia, consultant endocrinologist at Al-Zahra Hospital Dubai.

“Ensuring an adequate stock of regular medications, including insulin, is vital during these times when an overburdened healthcare system, shortages in supply of drugs and travel restrictions may pose a challenge,” he said.

“Employers may need to provide special working conditions to those suffering from diabetes to minimize their risk of exposure,” he told Arab News, adding that Gulf Cooperation Council states needed to put in place coordinated and effective measures for diabetic patients to prevent exposure to this infection.

“Working closely with the diabetes management team, optimizing diabetes control, practicing a healthy lifestyle, and staying safe and fit will not only protect patients with diabetes, it will also help them emerge from this pandemic stronger and healthier,” Hundia said.

Many regional governments have taken steps to combat the rise in the numbers of lifestyle diseases such as diabetes and obesity, including the Saudi government’s “Quality of Life Program,” one of the Vision Realization Programs of Saudi Arabia 2030.

“It aims to enhance the quality of life in the Kingdom through lifestyle improvement by increasing individuals’ participation in entertainment, sport and cultural activities,” Bin Abbas, of the King Faisal Specialist Hospital and Research Center, said.

“Other measures, including taxing sugary drinks, fitness initiatives and focusing on preventative care, have already been rolled out to address the rising epidemic.”

Twitter: [@CalineMalek](#)



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[Dubai malls, businesses to 'fully operate' from Wednesday](#)

Author:

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DUBAI: Shopping malls in Dubai will fully reopen for business on Wednesday, in the latest easing of coronavirus restrictions, the emirate's media office announced.

The step makes the glitzy city-state the first in the Middle East to drop nearly all restrictions to combat the spread of the novel coronavirus that hit retailers and leisure activities.

Dubai, one of the seven emirates that make up the United Arab Emirates, had already shortened a nighttime curfew to just seven hours starting from 11 p.m. (1900GMT).

Businesses in the private sector had been allowed since last week to work at 50 percent capacity, but the authorities now say they can “fully operate.” “Shopping malls and private sector businesses in the emirate will fully operate at 100 percent from tomorrow, Wednesday,” the Dubai Media Office tweeted on Tuesday.

Dubai’s shopping centers include the Mall of the Emirates, which has its own indoor ski slope, and Dubai Mall, adjacent to Burj Khalifa, the world’s tallest structure.

“The move aims to ensure the private sector is able to resume normal activity without compromising on preventive steps to protect people’s health and safety,” a media office statement said.

Preventative measures include wearing face masks, maintaining a minimum distance of two meters (around 6 feet) between individuals, and the regular use of hand sanitiser, the statement added.

Dubai has the most diversified economy in the Gulf, relying on trade, retail, tourism and real estate.

Its neighbor Abu Dhabi, the UAE’s capital, cordoned off the city and banned travel between regions in the emirate for a week starting Tuesday.

The UAE has so far recorded more than 35,000 cases of the COVID-19 respiratory disease, including 269 deaths.



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