

Lebanon, fearing second virus wave, to shut down again for 4 days

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Tue, 2020-05-12 14:14

BEIRUT: Lebanon's government has ordered most of the country to shut down again for four days, starting on Wednesday night, as it seeks to ward off a coronavirus resurgence after easing some restrictions.

The country has been under lockdown since mid-March to rein in an outbreak that has infected 870 people and killed 26. Lebanon started lifting restrictions last week as part of a longer-term plan, letting restaurants, hair salons, construction sites and others re-open at lower capacity.

But the cabinet agreed on Tuesday on the "full closure" for four days to curb a rise in new infections in recent days, after a drop in cases which the government had hailed as a success.

"This achievement is at risk of collapsing" because some people did not comply with the guidelines, Prime Minister Hassan Diab was quoted as saying during the meeting.

Information Minister Manal Abdel Samad said the four-day closure, which excludes supermarkets and pharmacies, would also allow teams from the health ministry to conduct more testing.

She added that the government would re-evaluate its original five-stage plan for gradually reopening the economy.

Beirut airport has been closed for nearly two months, except for flights bringing thousands of expatriates home, adding to the rise in infections.

The lockdown already includes an overnight curfew, with security forces patrolling some streets.

The pandemic has compounded woes in Lebanon, which was already wrestling with a financial crisis that has slashed more than half the value of its currency since late last year.



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[Algeria starts coronavirus test kits production](#)

Author:

Reuters

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ALGIERS: Algeria has started producing rapid test kits for the novel coronavirus, with a detection time of 15 minutes and a production capacity of 200,000 units per week, the government said on Monday.

The laboratory in the capital Algiers develops the test kits in partnership with Canadian and Jordanian firms, junior minister in charge of pharmaceutical production Lotfi Benbahmed said on state television, without naming the two foreign partners.

The North African country has allocated \$100 million to import medical equipment and pharmaceutical products to counter the virus. It has also received medical donations from China over the past days. The government has imposed a nationwide curfew, ordered the closure of most businesses and suspended public transport to slow the spread of the virus. Algeria has so far reported 5,891 confirmed infections, with 507 deaths and 2,841 recoveries.



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Algerian singer Idir, a Berber icon, has died in Paris
Over 1,000 Algerian passengers stranded at Istanbul airport

[Transfer of sphinxes to Cairo square stirs controversy](#)

Author:

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Tue, 2020-05-12 11:29

CAIRO: In a bustling square of Egypt's capital, four sphinx-like statues stand in wooden crates ahead of a planned unveiling ceremony following their controversial transfer from historical sites.

With the bodies of lions and heads of rams, the statues had for millennia graced Karnak temple in the southern city of Luxor representing the ancient Egyptian god "Amun."

This month, the restored sandstone statues were moved to Cairo's landmark Tahrir Square, the epicenter of a 2011 popular uprising that toppled longtime ruler Hosni Mubarak.

"I am against the moving of Luxor monuments. I was especially saddened by their relocation," legislator Ahmed Idris from the city told AFP.

"Luxor has long been like an open museum which should be developed and its monuments' historical value are tied to the city," said Idris.

The statues will be the square's centerpieces, along with a 19-meter-tall (60-foot-tall) pink granite obelisk of the famed Ramses II.

The 3,000-year-old obelisk – of Ramses II facing an ancient deity as well as inscriptions of his titles – was moved from a Nile Delta archaeological site.

The relocations which came as part of government plans to renovate Tahrir Square have drawn wide criticism from archaeologists and activists.

Some petitioned President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi to stop the transfer.

Others including lawyers from a rights group filed a lawsuit citing a 1964 Venice Charter on the conservation and restoration of monuments, saying the move could "jeopardize the priceless artefacts."

Egypt signed the charter, adopted by UNESCO, in 1974.

A frenetically busy square, Tahrir in downtown Cairo has long been associated with blaring car horns, traffic jams and exhaust fumes.

It stands a short stroll away from the Egyptian Museum, a tourist magnet which holds a vast collection of precious relics.

A staging ground for major protests in Egypt, the square has undergone multiple phases of renovation since the 2011 uprising.

Its renovation plan includes unifying building facades, removing street advertisements and an overhaul of its lighting.

In December, El-Sisi said the transfer of artefacts would add "a touch of civilization" to the site.

But fears have grown over possible damage to the monuments.

"The high pollution in Tahrir Square will ruin the antiquities and accelerate their deterioration," Egyptologist Monica Hanna said in a Facebook post in December.

"A monument's value is diminished when removed from its original historical context and becomes an ornament rather than a monument," she said.

Egyptian architect Ayman Badr has said the square does not need "to be adorned with historical elements" as it "already holds historical value."

Antiquities and Tourism Minister Khaled Al-Anani has dismissed warnings that the monuments could be vandalized or be affected by pollution.

Ancient relics in Egyptian museums or public spaces often suffer damage by graffiti, engravings or just being frequently touched.

"No-one will be able to touch them. They will be placed on a high pedestal and surrounded by a water fountain," Anani told a private television channel

in March.

He said they would undergo regular restoration and maintenance.

The statues were not among those lined up on the famed Kebash (rams) avenue linking Karnak and Luxor temples, according to the minister.

Mahmoud Zaki, a tour guide from Luxor, also sided with those defending the transfers.

“We exhibit artefacts abroad for foreigners to enjoy... and now it’s a great honor that antiquities from Karnak temple adorn Egypt’s most popular square,” he told AFP.

An unveiling ceremony is planned but an official date has yet to be announced.

“It’s nonsensical that (Egyptian) obelisks could be found in public spaces across the world and none of them stands in Egypt’s most popular square,” said antiquities expert Ali Abu Deshish.



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[tahrir_square](#)

Egypt sphinxes moved to Tahrir SquareCleric, archaeologist clash over whether Sphinx represents Prophet Idris

Britain would not support Israeli West Bank annexation, says minister

Author:

Reuters

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Mon, 2020-05-11 14:42

LONDON: Britain would not support an Israeli annexation of parts of the West Bank as it would make a two-state solution with the Palestinians more difficult to achieve, junior Foreign Office minister James Cleverly said on Monday.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has said it is up to Israel whether to annex parts of the West Bank.

But Cleverly told parliament: "Our long-standing position is that we do not support the annexation of parts of the West Bank, and ... doing so could make a sustainable two-state solution harder."

Meanwhile, France is urging its European Union partners to consider threatening Israel with a tough response if it goes ahead with a de facto annexation of parts of the occupied West Bank, three EU diplomats said. Belgium, Ireland and Luxembourg also want to discuss the possibility of punitive economic measures during a foreign ministers' meeting on Friday, the diplomats told Reuters, though all member states would have to agree to any collective action.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has said cabinet discussions will start in July over extending Israeli sovereignty to Jewish settlements and the Jordan Valley in the West Bank, as was mooted under US President Donald Trump's Middle East peace plan.

Palestinians have expressed outrage at Israel's plans to cement its hold further on land it seized in the 1967 Middle East war, territory they are seeking for a state.

The EU diplomats did not give details on what punitive measures EU member states might consider to try to dissuade Israel from making the move.

In terms of procedure, EU governments would need to ask the Commission and the EU foreign policy division, the EEAS, to draw up a list of options.

All 27 EU nations would need to agree to any EU response and Israel's closest allies such as Hungary and the Czech Republic could still block even preparatory work.

An EU spokesman on Monday declined to comment on internal discussions but said: "annexation is contrary to international law and if annexation goes ahead, the EU will act accordingly."

Israel has long been a part of the EU's research and innovation program Horizon 2020, which was worth nearly €80 billion between 2014 and 2020, according to the European Commission.

The EU is also Israel's top trading partner and Israel benefits from trade preferences with the world's largest trading bloc.

EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said in February Trump's plan departed

from “internationally agreed parameters.” Borrell said that steps to annex Palestinian territory, “if implemented, could not pass unchallenged.” That is a view taken by France, Belgium, Luxembourg and Ireland, according to EU diplomats.

“There is clearly a need to look at what annexation means in the context of international law and we do need to know our options,” said one senior EU diplomat involved in discussions.

“We also need to say what exactly the consequences of annexation would be, ideally as a way to stop any such move,” the diplomat said.

The Palestinians and many countries regard the West Bank settlements as illegal under the Geneva Conventions that bar settling on land captured in war. Israel disputes this, citing security needs and biblical, historical and political connections to the land.



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Tough conditions and no jobs in West Bank create dilemma for
Palestinians
Israeli defense minister backs 7,000 new West Bank settlement
units

Syria's Assad replaces trade minister amid economic crisis

Author:

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BEIRUT: Syrian President Bashar Assad replaced Monday the internal trade minister as the country's economic crisis worsens with prices of consumer goods increasing and the local currency reaching record lows.

Syria's economy has been ravaged by nine years of war and western sanctions. The presidential decree said Homs provincial governor Talal Barrazi will replace Atef Naddaf as Minister of Internal Trade and Consumer Protection. The decree gave no further details other than saying that Barrazi is no longer governor of Homs, Syria's largest province.

The Syrian pound plummeted to unprecedented levels in recent days reaching 1,485 pounds to the dollar on the black market compared with 47 to the dollar when the conflict began in March 2011.

That sent prices of basic goods soaring and was followed by restrictions imposed to prevent the spread of the coronavirus that limited movement and trade.

Eight out of 10 Syrians live below the poverty line, making less than \$100 a month, according to the United Nations.

On Sunday, Syria's Oil and Mineral Resources Ministry announced a reduction in automobile fuel subsidies in another measure to tackle the deepening economic crisis.



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