

# Lebanon suspends repatriation flights for virus-stranded nationals until April 27

Author:

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BEIRUT: Lebanon has suspended repatriation flights until April 27 for thousands of nationals trapped abroad by the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak.

The Lebanese Cabinet committee tasked with bringing home stranded citizens said the move was designed “to maintain the capacity of hospitals and hotels designated for isolation and to re-evaluate the measures taken.”

Meanwhile, Alwaleed Bin Talal Humanitarian Foundation announced that it would bear the costs of flying home students from Italy, France and Ukraine, while Middle East Airlines (MEA), Lebanon’s national flag carrier, has offered a 50 percent discount for students and allowed their family members to pay for flight tickets in Lebanese pounds.

The number of recorded COVID-19 cases in Lebanon on Wednesday rose by 17 – including five nationals returning from abroad – to 658.

There were 34 people newly infected by the virus among the 2,317 citizens returned to Lebanon between April 6 and 13 on 20 commercial flights, and 356 returnees on 53 private jets, that landed at Rafic Hariri International Airport on the permission of Lebanese authorities.

The COVID-19 cases had flown in from the UK, France, Spain, Liberia, Turkey, Qatar, and the UAE. The remainder of the returnees were still undergoing two weeks of home isolation to ensure that they had not contracted the deadly virus.

Thousands of people have registered with Lebanese embassies around the world to return home because of the COVID-19 outbreak, and they have been put on waiting lists drawn up by the Lebanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Some have been unable to cover their expenses due to the interruption of their business and difficulties in getting bank transfers in dollars from Lebanon, a problem which has particularly affected students.

Abdel Salam Marini, Alwaleed Bin Talal Humanitarian Foundation’s manager, said: “We are coordinating with the Lebanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and we have informed them that we will cover the cost of a full plane of students from France and another from Italy and there are hundreds of these (students) still stuck in these two countries.”

Two MEA flights, funded by the foundation, brought back 110 students last Saturday from Rome and 55 from Paris.

Marini added: "We are ready to bear the expenses of the return of more students, especially those stranded in northern Italy, and we propose to send a plane to Milan so that students can reach the airport without being exposed to infection during their movements. We will also bear the expenses of about 600 students who are still in France."

The cost of returning Lebanese students from Ukraine would also be footed by the foundation, he said. "About 400 students are studying in the semi-free universities of this country (Ukraine) and their families cannot afford to bring them back. We are ready and communicating with (Lebanese) Foreign Minister Nassif Hitti who asked us to sponsor these students and we agreed."

Alwaleed Bin Talal Humanitarian Foundation was established in 2003 and its initiatives and programs in Lebanon focus on addressing the social and medical needs of the country.



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# Iran's virus death toll likely 80% higher than official number

Wed, 2020-04-15 22:34

TEHRAN: The death toll in Iran from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic is likely nearly double the officially reported figures, due to undercounting and because not everyone with breathing problems has been tested for the virus, a parliament report said.

Iranian health officials offered no comment on the report, released on Tuesday, which represents the highest-level charge yet from within the country of its figures being questionable, something long suspected by international experts.

Iran on Wednesday put the death toll at 4,777, out of 76,389 confirmed cases of the virus – still making it the Middle East's worst outbreak by far.

The report comes as Iranian President Hassan Rouhani continues to push for a slow reopening of the country's economy, which remains targeted by crushing US sanctions. If its own figures offered to the World Health Organization are wrong, it adds to fears by some that encouraging people to return to work will spark a second wave of infections.

"In order to have more compatibility between protocol and estimated statistics, it is necessary to increase laboratory and testing capabilities in the country," the report said.

"Needless to say that through increasing the capacities, diagnosis of disease will be more possible and the spread of the disease will be more limited."

The 46-page report by Iran's parliament research center, published online, carries the weight of being written by nonpartisan experts within the country.

The explosive charge was merely a footnote on page 6 in what appeared to be an otherwise routine report.

It said Health Ministry death toll figures counted only those who died in hospitals and had gotten positive test results for the virus. That disregarded all coronavirus victims who died in their homes. The report also said that aggressive testing, something experts have seized upon as necessary in the pandemic, has not been done in Iran – meaning other cases likely have been missed. It suggested the true death toll in Iran is probably 80 percent higher than figures now given, or nearly double.

As far as the positive cases are involved, and given the undertesting, the number of people infected is probably "eight to 10 times" higher than the reported figures, the report said.

If correct, the report's worst-case figures would put Iran's death toll

potential as high over 8,500, with some 760,000 total cases. That would catapult Iran to the country with the highest number of infections in the world.

International experts long have suggested they suspected Iran's numbers, as its mortality was higher than other nations. While other countries also have seen cases spike, Iran's reported numbers so far have offered a gradual slope.

The report also accused authorities of not providing its authors with "detailed figures" over the disease. It also warned that more than 30,000 people could die if strict quarantine measures are not taken.

Deputy Health Minister Ali Reza Raisi on Wednesday acknowledged that the "limits of testing" faced by Iran mean it does not have accurate figures of all those infected.

"The real figures are more than the official statistics but it is not correct to multiply official figures by two or three," he said, without elaborating or directly addressing the parliament report.



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quarantined in parliament building

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## 'Corona' dates invade Egypt markets

Author:

Wed, 2020-04-15 22:28

CAIRO: Egyptians are known for giving new names to different types of dates. During the past two years, dates known as Mohamed Salah, named after the Egyptian football star playing for Liverpool, have cropped up.

This year is no different. One kind of date, the Corona, is now available in the market for 25 Egyptian pounds a kilogram (\$1.58).

"We are used to giving various types of dates new names every year," said Ahmed Amin, a merchant in a wholesale market in Moqattam.

"The names are usually trendy. One year, (Mohamed) Aboutrika, Egypt's former football superstar, was trending. Aboutrika dates were the most expensive," he said. "Other years, Egyptian actor Mohamed Ramadan was trending. Other times there was belly dancer Sofinar and pop star Shakira."

Amin said that merchants have also named their dates after the Egyptian actress Laila Elwy and El-Shabah (the ghost), as well as giving other names which dealers believe attract a large number of customers.

Amin said that the Corona was the most significant name to date because of the coronavirus, not only in Egypt but also across the world.

He laughed when he said that customers were buying the Corona dates in bulk, pointing out that customers are amused, too, when they buy them.

Mohamed Kamal, manager of a market affiliated to the state-owned Al-Ahram Consumer Complexes Company, said: "Huge amounts of Ramadan dates are now on the shelves while other large amounts remain in storage."

He said that 200 kilos of dry dates are available in markets at prices ranging from 11 to 16 Egyptian pounds.

"Another fine type of dry dates costs 26 pounds per kilo. As for half dried dates, they are sold in 700 gram packages for 15 pounds and 400 gram packages for 30 pounds."

Kamal called the half-dried dates "best-sellers."

In the run-up to Ramadan, the Chamber of Commerce in Cairo published a list of prices for dates. But Kamal said the list showed much disparity in the cost of dates. Ebrimi dates ranged from 12 to 22 pounds per kilo. The price of Syrian dates ranged from 6 to 16 pounds a kilo.

White Ghazal dates reached between 11 to 23 pounds a kilo. Merkaby dates were going for from 6 to 18 pounds. Ayanat dates were between 11 to 23 pounds. Alban dates ranged from 12 to 24 pounds. Wards dates recorded 11 to 25 pounds. Bertmoda dates were between 15 to 25 pounds. Skouti dates registered between 15 to 25 pounds. Aswani dates stood at 6 to 16 pounds. El-Gondeila dates were 15 to 25 pounds. And Qarn El-Ghazal dates were being sold at between 20 to 35 pounds per kilo.

Despite the “Corona” dates tag, market merchants have also introduced the slogan “No Corona among us,” fighting the virus by wearing gloves and face masks, while attempting to maintain social distancing and avoiding crowds. They underlined their determination to remain open in order to make a steady income.

And they added one more refrain: “Ramadan is incomplete without dates.”



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# Cairo shootout exploits coronavirus crisis

Author:

Wed, 2020-04-15 20:46

CAIRO: A shootout in El-Amireya neighborhood east of Cairo on Tuesday between police forces and a terrorist cell ended with the death of seven terrorists and one police officer.

The gunfight seems to be part of growing signs that terrorism is on the rise in Egypt.

The first indication of such an increase, according to security expert Hisham Belal, is the timing of the attacks. The Interior Ministry said in a statement that the terrorists were planning to attack during the Christian Coptic holiday celebrations in Egypt, adding that they had procured the necessary weapons. The Interior Ministry added that the terrorist cell used several places to hide in east and south Cairo where these venues were used as a launching pad to carry out their operations, coinciding with the Christian holiday.

"The terrorists were planning to exploit the coronavirus crisis, thus signifying that they are mean and vile people who hide behind the veil of religion while they know nothing about religion," Belal said.

However, Belal added that Egyptian police are on high alert "despite the pandemic we are passing through." Quick action by national security officers contributed to squashing the operations, he said.

The Interior Ministry statement said that the national security sector detected elements of the cell and dealt with them decisively, which resulted in the killing of seven terrorists who were found possessing six rifles, four cartridge guns, and huge amounts of explosives and various types of gunfire.

The statement added that "at a time when the state with all its institutions is battling the coronavirus, it continues to fight terrorism and terrorists who thought that this crisis could help them carry out their criminal acts."

Egyptian Coptic activist and intellectual, Rober El-Fares, points to other indications that terrorism has recently re-emerged in the country, saying terrorists had returned to target Copts, "something they had stopped in recent years after the terrorist Muslim Brotherhood was toppled in Egypt."

"They started planning following the dispersal of the Rabaa El-Adaweya sit-in in 2013, when they began attacking churches and monasteries," El-Fares said. "That same year, they attacked Copts during a wedding in Al-Athraa Church in Cairo's El-Warraaq neighborhood." Four people, including two girls aged eight and 12, were shot dead, and at least another 18 were injured.

"They continued their attacks by killing priests in northern Sinai, when

Daesh slaughtered 21 Copts in Libya (in 2017), in addition to the terrorist attack in December 2016 on St. Peter's Church in which 29 worshippers were killed."

For years, Egypt has been battling a low-level terrorist insurgency in the Sinai Peninsula, which at times has spilt over into the country's major cities.

In April 2017, two attacks were launched during the Palm Sunday mass. The first was in Margerges Church in the city of Tanta, in the Gharbeya governorate. Hours later, a second explosion ripped through Alexandria's Cathedral. At least 45 people were reported killed and 126 injured in the two suicide bombings.

Terrorists also attacked a bus transporting Christians in May 2017 in Minya governorate, killing 29 people.

Five people, including a Muslim police officer guarding Marmina Church in Helwan in southern Cairo in December 2017, were killed.

In 2018, terrorists targeted a bus transporting Copts on the road to Saint Samuel Monastery on Al-Qalmoun Mountain in Minya, killing seven Egyptians.

Former assistant to the interior minister, Farouk El-Meqrahy, underlined the importance of pre-emptive strikes as part of several police raids against terrorists with the aim of maintaining the safety and security of the nation.

He said such repeated pre-emptive security strikes against terrorists had led to a decline in terrorist attacks during the past two years.

Member of Parliament Abdel-Hady El-Qasaby described to Arab News the strong bond between police and the public in the fight against terrorism. In the El-Amireya gun battle, police officers called on residents to stay away from the windows of their homes and from building entrances to avoid being struck by stray bullets.

"Residents responded to the calls of the police," El-Qasaby said. He added that many residents wanted to take part in the battle.

Meanwhile, several MPs hailed the police actions in dealing with the terrorists. El-Qasaby underlined the country's "huge appreciation" of "martyrs who die while defending the nation."

Minutes after the El-Amireya battle ended, the name of the policeman who died during the confrontation, national security officer, Mohamed El-Houfy, went viral on social media.

"It was an appreciation of anyone who carries out his duty in serving the nation regardless of his job or position," El-Qasaby said.

El-Qasaby compared the heroism shown by the police with a mob in the village of Shobra El-Bahow, which recently refused to allow the burial of a doctor who had died of the coronavirus for fear of becoming infected.

Said El-Qasaby: "It is a deviant attitude among Egyptians who appreciate the sacrifices of their people."



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## [Amnesty slams Qatar's expulsion of migrant workers during coronavirus pandemic](#)

Wed, 2020-04-15 20:18

LONDON: Qatari authorities rounded up and expelled dozens of migrant workers after telling them they were being taken to be tested for coronavirus, Amnesty International said in a report published on Wednesday.

The report details the “inhumane” treatment of hundreds of men from Nepal who were apprehended by Qatari police in March.

Amnesty interviewed 20 of the men, who said police had told them they were going to be tested for the virus and would be returned to their accommodation afterward.

Instead, they were taken to detention centers, held in “appalling” conditions for several days, and then sent to Nepal.

One of the men detained in Doha told Amnesty: “We were asked to stop to test for the virus. Police told us that the doctor would come and check the virus. But they lied to us.”

Out of the 20 interviewed, only three said they had their temperature checked while in the detention facility.

“None of the men we spoke to had received any explanation for why they were treated this way, nor were they able to challenge their detention or expulsion,” said Steve Cockburn, Amnesty’s deputy director of global issues.

“After spending days in inhumane detention conditions, many were not even given the chance to collect their belongings before they were put on planes to Nepal,” he added.

“It is disturbing that the Qatari authorities appear to have used the pandemic as a smokescreen for further abuses against migrant workers.”

All the workers left Qatar without receiving their salaries or end-of-service benefits owed to them.

One man was given cash by his company while in detention, but a police officer took it for “safekeeping” and failed to return it.

In response to Amnesty’s report, the Qatari government claimed that “officials uncovered individuals engaged in illegal and illicit activity,” and accused the migrants of the “sale of dangerous food goods.”

But none of the men were ever told directly of any such charges, and documents given to the men and reviewed by Amnesty do not suggest that they were ever charged with any criminal offense.

Amnesty’s report is the latest of many issued by global rights groups expressing concern over Qatar’s treatment of the thousands of migrant workers who live and work in the country.



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