

# American citizens refuse COVID-19 repatriation to US from Lebanon, say Beirut is 'safer'

Thu, 2020-04-09 23:57

LONDON: US citizens living in Lebanon have reportedly turned down offers of repatriation from their government amid the coronavirus pandemic, saying it is "safer" in the capital Beirut, CNN reported.

In an [interview with the network](#), American Carly Fuglei said "it's probably safer here in Lebanon."

The humanitarian consultant, originally from Montana, was contemplating returning to the US from Beirut as the virus crisis deepened in the city and she was advised to do so by Danish friends returning to their homeland. But she decided to stay and Lebanon has since closed its borders indefinitely since March 19.

"I made that decision for a combination of personal reasons and calculations about the virus that we're all making," Fuglei told CNN.

With the US becoming the world's worst affected country by the COVID-19 outbreak, it's a decision many other US citizens in Beirut have taken.

The US government last week offered to fly citizens and permanent residents back to the states on a chartered flight for \$2,500 per person, but some Lebanon-based Americans tweeted their refusals.

"And no, Mom, I'm not going," Beirut-based journalist Abby Sewell said.

A Lebanese journalist responded, saying: "For once I'm like no America is not safer than here." Sewell's mother, Meg Sewell, replied: "Actually, for the moment I might have to agree."

For once I'm like no America is not safer than here

– Dalal Mawad [دلال معوض \(@dalalmawad\) April 1, 2020](#)

Sewell told CNN the US embassy's offer was never even an option for her.

"From everything I'm reading, the situation is worse in the US, in terms of the number of cases, prevention measures or lack thereof, and how overburdened the health system is," she says.

"Also, since I've been living overseas for years, I don't have health insurance in the US now, so if I did go back and then got sick, I would be looking at paying thousands of dollars out of pocket."

Another citizen, Daryn Howland, decided to carry on working in Beirut and also refused the repatriation offer.

"My plan is to stay here for the indefinite future, the fact that things are so bad in the US means it's one of the first times where it's safer to be in Lebanon than in the US," Howland said. "Despite the (Lebanese political and

economic) situation ... I think my odds are better here.

“All of my American friends here have decided to stay.”

The US embassy flew 95 American citizens out of Lebanon on April 5, the US State Department said. According to their figures, there are thousands of American citizens living in Lebanon – many who hold dual US-Lebanese citizenship.

“The Department of State has no greater priority than the safety and security of US citizens overseas,” an official told CNN. “We are rising to meet the historic challenge posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, every day, all over the world.”

As of Thursday, there are more than 450,000 cases of the virus in the US and 16,000 deaths, with 582 cases and 19 fatalities in Lebanon.



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Lebanon's police clear protest camps in Beirut as coronavirus curfew takes effect

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# Iran threat to US troops in Iraq remains 'significant'

Thu, 2020-04-09 23:32

WASHINGTON: Iranian-backed militia pose a continuing and “significant” threat to US forces in Iraq, the State Department’s top diplomat for the Middle East said on Thursday, about a week after US President Donald Trump warned of a sneak attack by Iran or its proxies.

Speaking to reporters in a teleconference, David Schenker, assistant secretary of Near Eastern Affairs at the U.S. State Department, did not give any details about the threat. “It continues to be significant,” he said. Iran-backed paramilitary groups have regularly been rocketing and shelling bases in Iraq that host US forces and the area around the US embassy in Baghdad.

Schenker’s comments came after three Katyushka rockets landed near a district in southern Iraq that houses workers for foreign oil companies on Monday, including US oil service company Halliburton. No casualties or damage were reported.



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## [Amnesty: Prisoners killed by Iran's security forces during coronavirus protests](#)

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Thu, 2020-04-09 23:37

LONDON: Dozens of Iranian prisoners are feared to have been killed by security forces after brutal force was used to put down protests over fears related to coronavirus spreading in the country's jails.

Thousands of inmates in at least eight Iranian prisons have recently taken part in protests as they fear being infected with COVID-19 in jails that are overcrowded, lack hygiene and have poor ventilation, Amnesty International reported on Thursday.

The protests were lethally repressed by prison officers and security officers, leading to the deaths.

Amnesty said in a press release that authorities responded with live ammunition and tear gas, killing some 35 inmates and wounding hundreds of others.

It added that security forces beat protesters in at least one prison, "possibly leading to the death of an inmate."

Amnesty told Arab News: "Many of Iran's prisons have unacceptable detention conditions, including overcrowding, poor ventilation, limited hot water, inadequate food, insufficient beds and insect infestations.

"They can therefore be highly susceptible to viral outbreaks. There is also often a lack access for prisoners to prompt medical assistance, medicines, adequate medical facilities, and hygiene and sanitary products."

Diana Eltahawy, Amnesty's deputy regional director for the Middle East and North Africa, called the Iranian authorities' response to the prison demonstrations "abhorrent," and said "an independent investigation into the torture and deaths in custody is urgently needed."

She added: "It is abhorrent that instead of responding to prisoners' legitimate demands to be protected from COVID-19, Iranian authorities have yet again resorted to killing people to silence their concerns.

"Security forces must be instructed to immediately cease the use of unlawful lethal force, and to refrain from punishing prisoners calling for their right to health."

Amnesty told Arab News: "We have seen reports that prisoners who have displayed COVID-19 symptoms are not being tested and are often being treated in the medical care facilities of prisons, which do not have specialist facilities to deal with the virus."

It said although the authorities have announced inmates being released, prisoners of conscience remain jailed and are treated with contempt.

"Hundreds of prisoners of conscience, including human rights lawyers, workers' rights activists, anti-death penalty campaigners and those jailed simply for their religious beliefs ... are languishing in prison solely for peacefully exercising their rights," Amnesty added.

"Some have health issues which they have either developed in prison or which have exacerbated in detention. Many of them have been denied adequate health care because the Iranian authorities routinely deny access to adequate medical care as a secondary punishment to these individuals."

Amnesty urged the authorities to release prisoners of conscience, along with people in pre-trial detention and those most at risk from the virus.

Iran, one of the countries worst-hit by the pandemic, on Thursday reported 117 new COVID-19 deaths, bringing the total number of fatalities to 4,110. It also declared 1,634 new cases of the virus, taking the total number of cases to 66,220.

The country's real figures are believed to be much higher. There have also been reports of several prison riots and jail breaks in Iran in recent weeks.



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## US urges Houthis to reciprocate Arab coalition ceasefire in Yemen

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Thu, 2020-04-09 23:18

LONDON: The United States on Thursday urged the Houthis to reciprocate a ceasefire in Yemen announced by the Arab coalition on Wednesday due to the coronavirus pandemic.

"The announcement is a constructive response to the UN Secretary General's call for the parties to focus on countering the COVID-19 pandemic," Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in a statement.

"We urge the Houthis to respond in kind to the coalition's initiative," he said.

Pompeo also thanked King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman for supporting the decision to announce a ceasefire.

The two-week ceasefire in Yemen started at midday on Thursday.

Later Thursday, the UK's foreign secretary, Dominic Raab, said the ceasefire was an "important step towards the permanent ceasefire Yemenis need."

"I urge the Government of Yemen and the Houthis to immediately cease all hostilities and engage constructively with these proposals," he said. "We must grasp this precious opportunity for peace in Yemen."



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Arab coalition's Yemen ceasefire receives wide supportArab coalition announces two-week ceasefire in Yemen

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## [Hamas arrests Palestinians in Gaza for Zoom video chat with Israelis](#)

Author:

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1586456274789133200

Thu, 2020-04-09 17:53

GAZA: Hamas arrested a Palestinian in Gaza on Thursday, saying that he had taken part in a video conference with Israelis and describing his act as

“treason.”

The Gaza interior ministry identified the man as Rami Aman and said that some of his associates, whose details were not disclosed, had also been arrested. Aman describes himself as a freelance journalist and member of a group called The Gaza Youth Committee on his Facebook page. The meeting for which he was arrested was held on Monday on the Zoom video conference app. It appears to have been organized by Israeli peace activists, who could not be reached for comment.

An invitation link to a Zoom conference entitled ‘Meet Gazan Activists’ was posted on a Facebook event page that has since expired. It read: “Finally, an opportunity to speak with Gazans who not only do not hate us but are working tirelessly to open channel of communication between Gazans and Israelis.”

It also named Rami Aman and his group as participants.

“Holding any activity or any contact with the Israeli occupation under any cover is a crime punishable by law and is treason to our people and their sacrifices,” Interior Ministry spokesman Eyad Al-Bozom said in a statement. Aman’s family could not be reached for comment and two Gaza-based human rights groups contacted by Reuters said they have not been approached by relatives over his arrest.

Hamas seized control of Gaza in 2007 and has since fought three wars with Israel. Flare-ups along the shared border are relatively frequent. Israel regards Hamas as a terrorist group and keeps Gaza under blockade, saying its aim is to stop weapons from reaching militant groups.

Coronavirus lockdowns have driven a surge in the usage of Zoom in recent weeks because it is free, and users are attracted by its ease of use. But concerns have grown over its lack of end-to-end encryption of meeting sessions, routing of traffic through China and “zombombing,” when uninvited guests crash meetings.

The incident triggered angry comments on social media by Palestinians in Gaza, with many praising Aman’s arrest.



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