

In Iraq, deadly coronavirus terrifies even doctors hardened by conflict

Author:

Sat, 2020-03-28 01:28

BADGHDAD: Through decades of conflict, Dr. Haidar Hantoush has watched wounded soldiers and civilians flood into Iraq's emergency wards. But he's never been so scared.

"Violence we can just about handle. Patients stream into hospitals for hours at a time – but you can see how many there are. You get a lull to prepare for the next round," said Hantoush, public health director for southern province Dhi Qar.

"With coronavirus, there's no safe place. We don't know when the number of cases will explode ... Even the world's best health care systems can't cope." Doctors and nurses across Iraq have treated hundreds of thousands of victims during decades of civil war, violence and sanctions, while watching what was once one of the best health care systems in the Middle East crumble. Now, they say Iraq may be singularly unprepared for the coronavirus. Iraq has a porous border with Iran, the worst-hit Middle Eastern country so far. The Iraqi religious calendar is dotted with annual pilgrimages, some of the biggest mass gatherings on earth, which typically attract millions of worshippers.

And since last year, Iraq's major cities have seen mass anti-government demonstrations that killed hundreds of people. State institutions are paralyzed by political deadlock after the government resigned and politicians failed to form a new one.

So far, Iraq has counted more than 450 coronavirus disease (COVID-19) cases and 40 deaths, most of them in the past week. But doctors worry that those figures barely scratch the surface of an epidemic that may already be raging undetected across crowded cities.

"There are many unrecorded cases. People aren't getting tested or taking it seriously," Hantoush said.

Loudspeakers on mosques in Baghdad blast out government guidelines daily urging people to stay at home and get tested if they think they are ill. A curfew is in place until April 11. Borders are shut and international flights halted.

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Dr. Haidar Hantoush, Public health director

But getting the message across is difficult in a country with deep distrust of the authorities. Tribes have sometimes refused to allow women with symptoms to be isolated because they do not want them to be alone in hospitals, Hantoush said.

Thousands of Iraqis participated in the most recent of Iraq's major pilgrimages, to the shrine of a Shiite Imam in Baghdad, where they crowded in defiance of the curfew.

"We're now asking pilgrims to self-isolate for 14 days," said Dr. Laith Jubr, 30, who works at a Baghdad ward testing suspected coronavirus cases.

The hospital had three deaths from the virus in the last week, he said, and several staff tested positive. Some people showing symptoms refused to be tested because they did not want to spend time in isolation.

"If this gets bigger it could be beyond our control. We could have 1,000 cases next week. There's a lack of ventilators and other equipment – maybe 10 ventilators at our hospital."

Jubr said many Iraqis were nonchalant because they thought they had "seen it all" through years of war.

"This is dangerous. We're facing a hidden enemy that requires not just doctors but the whole population to combat it."

Security forces deployed on Friday to Baghdad's densely populated Sadr City district, home to millions including many pilgrims, to enforce the curfew, a statement said.

The UN praised Iraq's early measures in closing borders last month but has urged respect for the curfew.

One Baghdad doctor said a sharp rise in cases is imminent.

"We're bracing for what happens in the next two weeks. And we can't cope," he said.



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As world locks down, Qatari construction presses ahead Abu Dhabi crown prince,

[As world locks down, Qatari construction presses ahead](#)

Author:

Sat, 2020-03-28 01:18

LONDON: The outbreak of coronavirus disease (COVID-19) across much of the world has forced many governments to act, with most ordering restrictions on daily life and working conditions, and some even ordering complete shutdowns in a bid to contain the pandemic.

Even where governments have left the choice up to employers, many have taken the decision to let employees work from home where possible to slow the spread, with others shutting down work for the foreseeable future to protect lives.

That has not been the case in Qatar, though, where many migrant laborers are still working on crowded, dangerous construction sites as the country gears up to host the 2022 FIFA World Cup.

Qatar's government has banned "all forms of gatherings ... including but not limited to the Corniche, public parks, beaches and social gatherings."

But despite also putting in place near-total bans on the operating of gyms, malls and banks, construction sites were notably not part of the ban.

Qatar currently has the third-highest number of confirmed COVID-19 cases in the Middle East, at 500.

But as Doha struggles to respond to COVID-19, and with the World Cup inching closer, work on stadiums and other infrastructure projects has continued apace, despite the majority of its cases being migrants.

Workers at Qatari construction sites reportedly receive very little in the way of health checks, and commute to work on packed buses from the camps in which they live, where proximity to others, often with 10 people to a dormitory, is a near constant.

In a report by The Guardian, laborers said they felt they had no choice but to continue going to work, facing pressure both from the companies that employ them and the need to support their families overseas.

It is hard for employees in any context to refuse to go to work, but in systems like Qatar, where employers have extreme levels of control over workers, it would be particularly risky.

James Lynch, Expert on migrant workers

"I worry a lot about getting the virus, but I need the money," said a Kenyan laborer, adding that he was not provided with protection beyond gloves and a

mask on his 14-hour shifts.

A Nepalese worker told The Guardian: "I use a face mask, which I bought myself. Those who don't have a mask cover their mouth with a piece of cloth." Migrant workers in Qatar face a difficult choice, especially with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Many pay large fees to secure sponsorship allowing them to travel, are underpaid for their labor, and are only allowed to leave or change their jobs with the permission of their employers – a practice many have likened to slavery and which, despite promises by Doha to end it, remains widespread. James Lynch, a director at Fair/Square Research and Projects, and an expert on migrant workers in Qatar, told The Guardian: "It is hard for employees in any context to refuse to go to work, but in systems like Qatar, where employers have extreme levels of control over workers, it would be particularly risky."

He added: "New migration to Qatar has been halted as a result of the pandemic, so the impact of losing your job is now even worse than it would be anyway."

Many have been outraged at the government's response, with social media posts illustrating the extent of ill-feeling among members of Qatar's migrant worker community.

"No one cares about our safety," said one. "Do they think we don't want to live? Do you think we don't want to see our families?"

Another wrote: "We are not robots. We are not immune to the virus."



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Abu Dhabi crown prince, Syrian president discuss coronavirus Turkish economy
'will be hardest hit by virus' among G20, says Moody's

[Abu Dhabi crown prince, Syrian president discuss coronavirus](#)

Author:

Reuters

ID:

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Fri, 2020-03-27 19:20

CAIRO: Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan and Syrian president Bashar Assad discussed the coronavirus pandemic over the phone on Friday, a statement from United Arab Emirates' news agency (WAM) reported. The statement added that both leaders discussed the precautionary measures taken in their countries to face this pandemic, adding that Sheikh Mohammed stressed to Assad that Syria would not be alone in these critical conditions. Sheikh Mohammed said Syria and the UAE need to place humanitarian solidarity over political issues during this common challenge "we are all facing."



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Italy coronavirus deaths rise by 919, highest daily tally since start of outbreak
King Salman holds calls with Chinese, Italian leaders about efforts to tackle coronavirus

Turkish economy 'will be hardest hit by virus' among G20, says Moody's

Fri, 2020-03-27 22:57

ANKARA: Turkey's economic outlook has been revised downwards by the international rating agency Moody's amid warnings that the country faces a major shock from the coronavirus pandemic.

"We expect Turkey's economy to be hit hardest" among G20 economies, Moody's said.

The agency said that the Turkish tourism sector, which accounts for about 13 percent of the country's \$753 billion economy, will be badly hit by domestic travel restrictions and falling demand because of the outbreak.

In its "Global Macro Outlook" report for 2020-21, Moody's said: "We expect Turkey's (B1 negative) economy to be hit hardest, with a cumulative contraction in second- and third-quarter gross domestic product (GDP) of about 7 percent. The shock will likely take a large toll on Turkey's tourism-related sectors through the summer."

In its previous report for 2019, Moody's kept Turkey's credit rating at B1 with a negative outlook.

Turkey's tourist industry employs about 1 million people, and experts warn that the coronavirus pandemic will weigh heavily on the sector with restrictions on commercial flights and holiday cancellations.

"The sector will shrink by up to 80 percent because of the coronavirus outbreak," Bulut Bagci, president of the World Tourism Forum Institute, told Arab News. "I don't expect any foreign tourists from the European market to come to Turkey this year."

While Moody's painted a gloomy picture concerning Turkey's economic outlook, Treasury and Finance Minister Berat Albayrak said that he remains optimistic the country will meet its 5 percent growth target.

Turkey last week announced a \$15 billion fiscal stimulus plan focused entirely on the business sector in the wake of the coronavirus outbreak.

Moody's revised its 2020 growth forecasts downward for all G20 economies, except Saudi Arabia (AI stable), which is expected to maintain its GDP growth this year.

With Turkey's indebted economy vulnerable to external shocks, tourism is one of the main sources of money flow.

Meanwhile, the Turkish business group TUSIAD has penned an open letter to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, urging him to take tougher steps against the coronavirus outbreak.

TUSIAD claims that the stimulus plan announced by Erdogan is insufficient to halt the economic fallout from the virus.

Businesses say the country's lockdown will curb the spread of the virus, but fears remain about the impact on the economy, which has yet to recover from the 2018 currency crisis.

Turkey's economic confidence index fell by 5.9 percent month-on-month in March to 91.8 points, the state-run Turkish Statistical Institute said on Friday.

The consultancy firm Capital Economics also cut its 2020 growth forecast for Turkey this week, saying its economy would contract by 2 percent and warning that Turkey will face an economic slowdown like other European emerging market countries.

Wolfgang Piccoli, co-president of Teneo Intelligence in London, said that Turkey needed an "economic pact" that caters for workers and households in order to minimize economic disruption because of coronavirus.

"The package announced by Erdogan looks like a package for a standard economic crisis, but the current situation is unprecedented and requires unprecedented responses, similar to measures being announced in the UK and Germany," he told Arab News.

According to Piccoli, Turkish authorities seem to think the crisis is a temporary issue.

"They underestimate the damage that will result, and they are not giving the business community guidance on the duration of the restrictive measures or the length of the economic slowdown," he said.

Turkey is facing the crisis with limited fiscal and monetary capabilities to help its economy recover, Piccoli said.



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Turkey could impose stay-at-home order if coronavirus outbreak worsens
Turkey limits export of respiratory support gear as coronavirus cases surge

[Fighting escalates in Libya despite coronavirus threat](#)

Author:

Reuters

ID:

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Fri, 2020-03-27 12:24

BENHAZI: Battles raged on several fronts in Libya on Friday after a night of heavy bombardment in Tripoli, combatants and residents said, despite the threat continued fighting poses to efforts to stop the coronavirus pandemic. Serious warfare resumed this week after a comparative lull in recent weeks, defying international calls for calm to allow Libya's fragmented and overstretched health system to prepare for any spread of the coronavirus. Libya confirmed its first case of the highly infectious respiratory disease

on Monday – a Libyan man recently returned from overseas. After years of instability and violence, much of the North African country's medical infrastructure is in ruins, hospitals and clinics have been targeted, and many doctors and nurses have not been paid since December.

The Libyan National Army (LNA) of eastern-based commander Khalifa Haftar has been assaulting Tripoli for nearly a year, hoping to capture the capital in the northwest where the internationally recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) is based.

The United Arab Emirates, Egypt and Russia have been supporting the LNA militarily, while Turkey and allied Syrian fighters are backing the GNA. Diplomacy has foundered, with the latest round of talks in Geneva making no progress toward a political solution last month, and the UN envoy resigning for health reasons.

Before he quit, he warned that the arms embargo on Libya was being routinely violated, with foreign weaponry and fighters arriving in the country to join both sides.

On Thursday, the European Union said it would launch a new naval and air mission to stop further breaches of the embargo.

Huge explosions rattled Tripoli from midnight onwards, with artillery fire echoing around the city on Friday morning, according to residents.

Fierce clashes were reported in the west of Libya, between Tripoli and the Tunisian border, in the capital's southern suburbs, and in the frontline region between Sirte and Misrata to the east of Tripoli.

An LNA military source said fighting had resumed at dawn on Friday west of Sirte, a port city in central Libya captured by the LNA in January. The media office for pro-GNA forces did not comment.

The United Nations "is alarmed that hostilities have continued in and around Tripoli despite the announced humanitarian pause," a UN statement said on Friday.



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War-torn Libya reports first coronavirus case
Five Libyan civilians killed in Tripoli shelling, says unity government