

Turkey's new anti-corona economic package 'unrealistic'

Author:

Sat, 2020-03-21 01:35

ANKARA: As official figures report increasing rates of deaths and confirmed cases linked to the coronavirus, the Turkish government has announced a new package intended to tackle the economic effects of the unprecedented outbreak.

The package, named Turkey's Economic Stability Shield Package, is worth 100 billion liras (\$15.3 billion). It includes provisions for the rescheduling of tax duties, loans and social insurance payments, along with some incentives for Turkish businesses in the country's \$750 billion economy.

In order to stimulate credit expansion, the Credit Guarantee Fund limit has been increased to 50 billion liras from 25 billion liras. The value-added tax on airlines was decreased to 1 percent from 18 percent. Tradesmen's loans held by the state-run Halkbank were delayed for three months.

The measures come at a time when Turkish citizens are advised to stay home as a precaution to curb the spread of the virus.

Social insurance payments retail, iron and steel, logistics, food, automotive, cinema, textile and hotel businesses were postponed for six months. The package also promises to financially support export companies. Economists have criticized the multibillion-euro package in response to the expected slowdown, however, finding it unrealistic considering the extent and speed with which the pandemic is spreading.

Many bankruptcies and payment defaults are expected in Turkey, especially among small and medium-sized enterprises, which could trigger mass unemployment.

Shopping malls throughout the country have recorded a 70 percent decrease in sales over the past week.

Turkey's service industry constitutes about 60 percent of the country's domestic economy.

Oner Guncavdi, professor of economics at Istanbul Technical University, said that the package does not meet the needs of ordinary citizens.

"It instead helps employers in recovering from this crisis," he told Arab News.

"The package may also increase the debt burden because Turkey currently has no financial capabilities to finance this package."

Turkey's unemployment rate reached 13.7 percent in 2019 with a 2.7 percentage point rise from the previous year, mainly because of the recession, the state-run statistical body announced on Friday.

There is a need to ensure income transfer and direct cash injection to households to support demand. Infrastructure megaprojects are no longer needed because there is now an urgent need for public spending in the health sector.

Oner Guncavdi, Professor of economics

COVID-19 is also expected to weigh down economic growth for the rest of 2020 in Turkey. A growth rate of 5.1 percent is expected for the last quarter of 2019 and 0.6 percent for the overall year.

Guncavdi expects a serious rise in unemployment within two months, which would have dramatic repercussions as the shrinkage in economic activity leads to a decrease in domestic demand.

"There is a need to ensure income transfer and direct cash injection to households to support demand. Infrastructure megaprojects are no longer needed because there is now an urgent need for public spending in the health sector," he said.

Some analysts also draw attention to the possible financial problems that Turkey's newly built Istanbul airport and its operating consortium could face following the corona outbreak, which has negatively impacted the tourism and transport sectors.

Credit rating agency Moody's has recently downgraded its forecast for the growth of the Turkish economy in 2020 to 2.5 percent.

According to economist Cuneyt Akman, the coronavirus pandemic caught the Turkish economy at a very bad time as the country is already indebted and its financial resources are especially weak after the 2018 currency crisis.

"This economic stimulus package is employer-friendly. Currently, ordinary citizens don't intend to buy cheap houses or take a cheap holiday ticket, because everybody stays at home. Such incentives are not rational in light of the dynamics on the ground," Akman told Arab News.

Turkey's budget balance posted a deficit of 123.7 billion Turkish liras (\$21.77 billion) last year, and bank credits have provided the government with a key instrument for economic stimulus.

Akman anticipates a wave of dismissal in the following months, which would hit low-income households first.

"During recession periods, employers first prefer to dismiss their workers. If such a practice expands, people will begin feeling unsafe and will avoid spending any money, which would trigger wide-ranging effects. Maybe this will be an occasion to initiate structural reforms in the economy," he said.

The Turkish Central Bank recently announced that the country's short-term external debt stock totaled \$123.6 billion as of end-January.

As the spread of coronavirus continues to crush tourism and hospitality, the two sectors will not be able to support the economy this year. Export-based sectors are also expected to shrink.



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Turkey postpones events until end-April over coronavirusUS blames Russia, not Assad, for Turkey's loss

[Stranded Yemenis in plea for help after Houthi lockdown](#)

Author:

Sat, 2020-03-21 01:25

AL-MUKALLA: Thousands of Yemenis have been left stranded in the central province of Baydha and the southern province of Dhale after a Houthi militia lockdown to prevent the spread of coronavirus.

Iran-backed Houthis, who control most of heavily populated northern Yemen, including Sanaa, circulated an order on March 16 telling local transport companies to halt travel to and from the territories for two weeks to prevent the spread of the virus.

In the order, the militants said that they wanted to stop the virus spreading via travelers from "neighboring countries," a reference to thousands of Yemeni Umrah pilgrims and expatriates who recently crossed into Yemen through

the Wadea border crossing with Saudi Arabia.

Amateur videos on social media showed thousands of Yemenis crowding outside two Houthi checkpoints in the Afar region in Baydha and Qa'ataba in Dhale. Travelers said that the Houthis left them in the open without proper sanitation or water and food. Other images showed elderly people, women and children seeking shelter under buses and vehicles.

Local transport companies have been forced to halt travel from government-controlled areas to Sanaa and other northern provinces in order to prevent congestion at Houthi checkpoints.

A bus official in Sanaa told Arab News on condition of anonymity that his company will stop carrying travelers from southern Yemen to Sanaa until the Houthi restrictions are lifted.

According to the official, the rebels have claimed they will send 100 health workers to test travelers at the checkpoints.

"We will wait for some time before resuming trips," he said.

HIGHLIGHT

Travelers said that the Houthis left them in the open without proper sanitation or water and food.

On social media, Yemenis strongly criticized the Houthi travel restrictions, warning that thousands of stranded people are at risk of falling ill if they are left in open quarantine for days.

"The unhygienic Houthi quarantine will lead to a humanitarian catastrophe and hasten the spread of coronavirus," Jamel Aiz Addin, Yemen state TV director, said on Twitter on Thursday.

"They are holding those who return in areas with no water, medicine, food, shelter or health services," he added. "Where are the social organizations and WHO?"

Yemen's Health Minister Dr. Nasser Baoum said on Thursday that the King Salman Center for Relief and Humanitarian Work (KSRelief) has sent urgent medical assistance worth \$3.5 million to help war-torn Yemen cope with the spread of coronavirus.

The official Saba news agency said that the aid includes testing kits, sanitizers, drugs and protective equipment such as masks and gloves.

Yemen Prime Minister Maeen Abdul Malik Saeed last week appealed for help from KSRelief and WHO after the country exhausted its supply of testing kits on thousands of Yemenis returning from abroad.

While Yemen has yet to record a single case of coronavirus, the internationally recognized government has closed schools, shut down land crossings, and stopped flights to and from the country.

On Friday, authorities in the southeastern province of Hadramout halted cultural activities and celebratory gatherings such as weddings. However, mosques and markets are still bustling with people.



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Egypt fights deadly virus with a healthy dose of humor
Jordan imposes strict 4-day curfew after citizens ignore virus warnings

[Egypt fights deadly virus with a healthy dose of humor](#)

Author:

Sat, 2020-03-21 01:17

CAIRO: As Egypt joins the global battle against coronavirus, Egyptians have adopted a tried-and-tested method for dealing with a crisis – making fun of it.

Coronavirus may be the No. 1 issue on Egyptians' minds, but many are discovering that humor is the best medicine to combat the illness.

On Friday, the official number of coronavirus cases in the country climbed to almost 300, with seven deaths. However, some fear the actual number of cases may be much higher.

Instead of showing fear and anxiety, many Egyptians have resorted to sarcastic comedy on social media.

Minister of Health Hala Zayed became a favorite target of online satire after

she wore a medical mask incorrectly, giving the impression that the country's top health official does not understand basic health safety rules.

Facebook messages also mocked Zayed for visiting China last month, with some saying she was delivering an Egyptian vaccine and others that she wanted to bring the virus home with her.

The jokes did not stop there. Some said that corona was simply the name of the popular chocolate brand in Egypt.

Others suggested that since the virus originated in China, it won't last long since all Chinese products have a limited shelf life.

One woman shared a post saying: "The world is almost coming to an end and here I am stuffing vine leaves."

As virus cases surged in Egypt and the Ministry of Health offered instructions on virus protection using ethyl alcohol, someone tweeted a dialogue between comedians Mohamed Saad and Hassan Hosni: "Are you crying because you don't have ethyl alcohol? No, I'm crying because I put my hands on my face."

Another tweet: "My wife made cheese with Dettol. Delicious." Social media users shared a video showing Egyptian actresses making fun of the virus. These included Zeina, who appeared in a video during the Luxor African Film Festival, which was canceled due to the pandemic.

BACKGROUND

Minister of Health Hala Zayed became a favorite target of online satire after she wore a medical mask incorrectly, giving the impression that the country's top health official does not understand basic health safety rules.

Zeina posted an updated video on her Instagram account saying that she was terrified and wasn't taking the viral threat lightly.

After the Egyptian government suspended schools and universities, and closed shops, restaurants and malls overnight, sarcasm was directed at the state of marital relationships. Divorce rates will surge because husbands and wives will be at home together, some claimed. "I see that all those who wanted to die and were thinking of committing suicide are now walking around with alcohol and face masks," said one Twitter user.



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Egypt facilitates evacuation of citizens from Kuwait
Egypt closes cinemas, theaters to contain coronavirus spread

[UAE announces first two deaths from coronavirus](#)

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1584739739945389700

Fri, 2020-03-20 20:38

CAIRO: The UAE health ministry announced on Friday its first two deaths from coronavirus, UAE official news agency WAM said.

The two deaths are for cases that suffered from previous health conditions, the agency said.



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Most Saudi Arabia, UAE residents 'scared' of coronavirus: poll

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By SARAH EL DEEB | AP

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1584735624605123300

Fri, 2020-03-20 17:00

BEIRUT: Foreign Minister Nassif Hitti on Friday summoned the US Ambassador to Lebanon Dorothy Shea over the transportation of Israeli agent Amer Al-Fakhoury from the US Embassy in Awkar to the US.

Hitti's office said that the minister listened to Shea give "an explanation about the circumstances of Amer Al-Fakhoury being transferred abroad from the

US Embassy.”

A US military helicopter landed at the embassy on Thursday before leaving and flying out to sea.

US citizen Al-Fakhoury had taken refuge in the embassy on Monday, after Lebanon’s military court dropped charges of “killing and torturing detainees at Khiam prison in the South during the Israeli occupation before the year 2000” against him.

The court said that charges against him were dropped because the statute of limitations had expired, which meant that 20 years had passed since the crimes took place without anyone filing a complaint against him.

The helicopter was able to fly in due to an agreement signed by the US and Lebanon in 1982, allowing US planes to “enter Lebanese airspace and land on its territory without revealing the nature of the mission.”

Al-Fakhoury was arrested in September 2019 at Beirut airport while returning from the US after he had fled to Israel when the occupation forces withdrew from Southern Lebanon.

He was recognized and spent months at one of Lebanon’s hospitals during his arrest, since he suffers from advanced cancer.

SPEEDREAD

US citizen Al-Fakhoury had taken refuge in the embassy,, after Lebanon’s military court dropped charges of ‘killing and torturing detainees at Khiam prison in the South during the Israeli occupation before the year 2000’ against him.

Activists accused Hezbollah of being “an accomplice of the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) to release Al-Fakhoury.”

This necessitated the appearance of Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah on TV on Friday night to clarify its position.

The head of the court that released Al-Fakhoury, Brig. Gen. Hussein Abdallah, announced his resignation on Friday morning.

“Out of respect for my oath and military honor, I am resigning from heading the military court, where the application of the law equals the release of an agent, the pain of a captive and the betraying of a judge,” he said.

Prime Minister Hassan Diab tweeted: “The crime of being an informant for the Israeli enemy cannot be forgotten. The rights of martyrs and liberated prisoners do not fade in heaven’s justice by the passage of time.”



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Lebanese judge orders retrial of Lebanese-American