

Hundreds of Bahrainis stuck in Iran as evacuation plans stall

Author:

Fri, 2020-03-20 03:20

DUBAI: Hundreds of Bahraini pilgrims are stranded in Iran, the epicenter of the coronavirus outbreak in the Middle East, as Bahrain struggles to evacuate its citizens from a country with which it has no diplomatic ties.

Jamal, who has been in Mashhad with his wife and daughter since early February, told Reuters he was awaiting news of repatriation plans after a government-chartered flight was delayed last Thursday and again this Thursday.

"Yesterday we were ready to leave and then at the last moment they said the flight was canceled without any explanation," the 62-year-old man, who declined to give his last name, said by telephone from his hotel.

Bahrain said the company from which its Health Ministry had leased an airplane to conduct a second repatriation flight had backed out and authorities were seeking alternatives "as soon as possible," state news agency BNA said on Wednesday.

There are no direct flights between Bahrain and Iran, where the death toll from the coronavirus now exceeds 1,200.

Bahrain repatriated 165 people last week on an Omani airplane. Authorities have said around 85 of them have so far tested positive for the virus.

Many Bahrainis go to Iran via Oman and Dubai on pilgrimage to Mashhad and Qom, where the outbreak in Iran began.

Bahraini national Reda Ali said his elderly father had died on pilgrimage in Mashhad last week from a heart attack. He now fears for his 75-year-old mother, who he said has pre-existing conditions, and for his brother.

"I fear a lot for those (pilgrims) ... Most are old or retired people," he told Reuters from Bahrain, voicing concern about the availability of medicine in Iran, which has been hit by Western sanctions.

"Many families in Bahrain fear for the unknown fate of their families," he said.

Bahraini authorities have tasked a foundation under the Justice and Islamic Affairs Ministry to cover the costs of nationals stranded abroad, BNA said.

Bahrain, which has reported 269 coronavirus cases, most of them linked to travel to Iran, has criticized the Islamic Republic for not stamping Bahraini citizens' passports.

For Jamal, the priority is to return home.

“We remain in our rooms most of the time, we are fine. It’s just the anxiety of what’s happening in Iran and all the delays of our evacuation.”



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Stocks spike as central banks throw kitchen sink at virusUS fast-tracking antimalarials to treat coronavirus

[Most Saudi Arabia, UAE residents 'scared' of coronavirus: poll](#)

Fri, 2020-03-20 02:26

DUBAI: Despite the relatively small number of confirmed diagnosis of coronavirus in both Saudi Arabia and the UAE, a majority of residents (64 percent and 61 percent respectively) are scared of contracting the disease.

At least that is what data from a tracker created by the global research firm YouGov suggests.

The ongoing tracker captures public sentiment around the new coronavirus in 21 countries and illustrates how different regions are reacting to the rising number of infections globally.

The pneumonia of unknown cause was first detected in Wuhan, China, and reported to the World Health Organization (WHO) Country Office in China on Dec. 31.

The outbreak was declared a “public health emergency of international concern” on Jan. 30. By March 7, the global number of confirmed cases had surpassed 100,000.

The coronavirus pandemic is evolving fast. Community transmission is currently spreading throughout several countries and is expected to expand quickly in the coming days.

Clearly, time is of the essence in the fight against the coronavirus. On March 17, Dr. Poonam Khetrapal Singh, WHO’s Asian regional director, said: “We need to be geared to respond to the evolving situation with the aim to stop transmission of Covid-19 at the earliest to minimize the impact of the virus.

“Urgent and aggressive measures are the need of the hour. We need to act now.”

As of Thursday, the John Hopkins University global Covid-19 tracker had put the number of active cases in Saudi Arabia at 232. The Kingdom’s Ministry of Health said eight people had recovered.

For the UAE, the tracker reported 87 active cases and another 26 cases of recovery.

Majorities of respondents in both Saudi Arabia and the UAE said they are “very scared” or “fairly scared” about contracting the coronavirus, according to the YouGov survey.

On the other hand, 30 percent of respondents said they are “not very scared” or “not at all scared.”

Among the genders, a higher number of women than men in the two countries are fearful of contracting coronavirus infection (66 percent versus 60 percent).

The widespread level of fear possibly explains why the vast majority of people in Saudi Arabia and UAE are taking precautions.

The most common precaution has been to improve personal hygiene, such as washing hands more frequently or using sanitizer, which three-quarter of residents (76 percent) are doing.

Almost as many (73 percent) are avoiding crowded places. Roughly half the survey respondents are refraining from touching objects in public (57 percent) and many are wearing a face mask in public (37 percent).

Witnessing the wide-scale frenzy around the outbreak, a quarter of respondents have stockpiled supplies in their house, although a majority (68 percent) have chosen not to.

Analysis of the data shows that despite the extensive global coverage and the widespread proactive government measures in place in both Saudi Arabia and the UAE, there are still pockets of the population that could do more to stay up to date with the latest guidance.

While 88 percent of respondents said that they were undertaking additional preventative measures to protect themselves from the virus, 5 percent of those surveyed had no awareness of the pandemic.

Those who stated that they had not previously heard of “coronavirus”, “Wuhan Virus” or “Covid-19” were most likely to be aged 18-24, single and male.

An additional 3 percent of those surveyed said that they were aware of the virus but it had not changed their behaviors.

A third of the respondents in the Kingdom and the UAE aged 45 or older (34 per cent) said they are either “not very scared” or “not at all scared” about getting infected.

The optimism and confidence illustrated in those aged over 45 possibly correlates with the fact that they are taking the right measures to protect themselves.

According to WHO’s Dr. Singh: “Simple public health measures are critical. Practicing hand hygiene, covering your cough and sneeze, and practicing social distancing cannot be emphasized enough.

“This alone has the potential to substantially reduce transmission.”

The YouGov data show that 80 per cent of those aged over 45 in Saudi Arabia and the UAE are following this advice.

In contrast, just 69 percent of 18-24-year-olds in both countries report taking additional measures to wash their hands.

In the two countries, 80 percent of residents over the age of 45 are taking additional precautions to avoid crowded places and 70 percent of people aged 18-24 report avoiding crowded places.

Across the two countries, the vast majority (70 percent) feel well-informed about what to do if they suspect they have coronavirus.

At the same time, 18 percent of all respondents feel that they do not have enough information, with young adults being especially likely to feel this way (24 percent of 18-24 years old respondents).

Beyond Saudi Arabia and the UAE, Malaysia had the highest number of people (83 percent) concerned about contracting the virus, followed by the Philippines and Thailand, according to the YouGov study.

In China, where the virus is now reported to be under control, 66 percent of residents report being fearful of contracting the virus.

In Italy, the center of the European outbreak, 66 percent people are fearful of contracting the disease.

The view of residents in the US and UK is more positive, with just 38 percent and 34 percent respectively reporting that they have concerns.

By Thursday, the US had 9,415 cumulative confirmed cases of Covid-19, according to Johns Hopkins data.

In the coming days, as YouGov tracks the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on consumer attitudes and behaviors in the Middle East, Arab News will be continuously reporting on the findings.



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[European leaders' video-conference on Syria brought extra cash to Ankara](#)

Author:

Thu, 2020-03-19 23:21

ANKARA: Amid escalating tensions between Brussels and Ankara over refugee management policy, the latest video conference between Turkish, French, German and UK leaders resulted in an increase of EU funds for refugees in Turkey.

In their meeting with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron committed to provide more humanitarian funding.

UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson, whose country was excluded previously from EU leaders' talks, also attended the video conference – a sign that the UK intends to re-engage into the Syria crisis.

Hosting about four million refugees, most of whom coming from Syria, Erdogan had asked for more EU assistance for handling the crisis.

After Erdogan opened his country's borders with the EU for the mass exodus of refugees, migrants from different nationalities amassed on the Turkish-Greek border before being pushed back by the Greek authorities.

Brussels accused Turkey of using refugees as bargaining chips for getting more help from the EU.

Turkey in turn blamed the EU for not keeping financial and political promises under the refugee deal concluded between the parties in March 2016, especially regarding financial aid that was not provided in full, and accelerated visa facilitation that was not achieved.

Out of €6 billion (\$6.4 billion) committed by the EU in the past for refugees in Turkey, only about €3.2 billion has been paid.

Fresh cash pledges are expected to prevent thousands of refugees from leaving the country towards Europe by dangerous land and sea journeys.

Sinem Adar, a researcher on Turkey at the German Institute for International

and Security Affairs, said the willingness to provide more funds to Turkey was primarily about improving social and economic participation of refugees in Turkey.

“The underlying assumption is that most of the Syrian refugees in Turkey are there to stay and that Turkey needs more support to better integrate this population. The existing research supports this assumption,” she told Arab News.

But the EU funding is not promised as a direct payment to the Turkish government.

Concerning how potential new funds will be dispersed, Adar said, the EU had certain budgetary stipulations that it needed to follow.

“This means that providing the funds directly to the government should not be possible. Thus, I would expect that any potential funds will be dispersed on a project basis and to the ministries, NGOs, international organizations and municipalities. If anything, I think the EU should increase support to local actors in Turkey,” she added.

Adar thinks that, following the EU’s potential increase of funds, the concession from the Turkish side will be commitment to EU-Turkish cooperation over migration.

“Given that EU member states lack agreement among themselves over a common asylum policy, getting the support of Turkey on migration and border management is important for the EU,” she said.

“Regarding the political situation in Turkey, it is clear that accession negotiations and visa liberalization are (and should be) off the table. But the modernization of (the) customs union can provide the EU with a useful instrument to emphasize the rule of law issues. The second issue is of course whether, and if so how, Turkey should be given the message that refugee lives are and should not be instruments for political bargain.”

Ankara has long criticized the EU, saying that it bears too much responsibility in handling refugee flow from Syria, and that European nations have failed to do their part.

For Berkay Mandiraci, a Turkey analyst at the International Crisis Group, the timing and quantity of the new funding remains unclear.

“This is critical as the humanitarian aid and basic service needs of displaced civilians in Idlib as well as thousands of migrants stranded at the Turkey-Greece border make new cooperation imminent,” he told Arab News. “But EU leaders are unwilling to compromise quickly to what they and the Europeans have perceived as Ankara’s blackmail.”

Experts also underline the need for an urgent solution to the ongoing humanitarian crisis along the Turkish-Greek borders vis-à-vis the global coronavirus outbreak, considering that the Syrian war has entered its tenth year.

Protecting refugee camps from the outbreak where social distancing rules do not work is vital to prevent another humanitarian crises, especially considering an impending “catastrophe” in rebel-held Idlib, with more and more civilians displaced in a short period of time – almost one million in just two months.

“Fears of the spread of the coronavirus among those displaced by conflict requires more funding for medical services and facilities, which is greatly lacking,” Mandiraci said.



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Greek police use tear gas on migrants at Turkish border
HRW denounces Greece over migrants held on warship

[Lebanon closes land, air and sea borders as UN offers help to fight virus](#)

Author:

Thu, 2020-03-19 23:13

BEIRUT: Lebanon has become one of the latest countries to close its land, air and sea borders in a bid to slow the spread of the killer coronavirus and avoid overwhelming hospitals.

President Michel Aoun on Thursday presided over a Lebanese Cabinet session wearing a face mask and ministers were asked to don gloves and face shields while keeping a safe distance between each other to help prevent transmission of the virus.

"It was my first time wearing a face mask because the risk has increased," said Minister of Health Hamad Hassan at the end of the meeting.

"Six new unknown-source cases were detected. They were the result of a community transmission, which makes the situation more dangerous. I requested the isolation of the two regions with the highest number of cases. I also asked the security forces to be strict to the point of prohibiting people from leaving their houses," he added.

Lebanon currently has 149 confirmed cases of COVID-19 disease, with four deaths.

Meanwhile, during a meeting with representatives of international organizations, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said: "The UN is ready to assist Lebanon, its government and people during these difficult times facing the country, the region and the world."

Despite power cuts and water shortages in some parts of the country, many Lebanese citizens set up temporary offices to work from home. Meanwhile, security personnel issued tickets to those breaching government orders banning gatherings and the opening of stores.

Private and public transport in the country has almost ground to a halt, but food shops did not report any of the frantic scenes of panic buying witnessed in Europe and the US.

As cases of the virus continued to rise, Rafik Hariri University Hospital (RHUH) on the outskirts of southern Beirut, said it was running short of coronavirus testing kits and would have to limit their use to urgent patients only until a delivery of 20,000 packs arrived from abroad.

Hassan ordered private laboratories conducting coronavirus tests to "report any confirmed cases or risk penalties."

Lebanon's airport-closure move excluded UNIFIL (UN Interim Force in Lebanon) aircraft, diplomatic missions accredited in Lebanon, international organizations, cargo flights and passengers working for oil and gas exploration companies.

In a message to employees and the Lebanese people, Mohamad El-Hout, chairman of Middle East Airlines (MEA), which has been forced to ground its fleet, said: "MEA had faced many similar hardships before, where its fleet was grounded for many days. However, the company is able to overcome this situation and has the capabilities to do so. We will receive new aircraft and

fly again.”

One pilot and two flight attendants were infected while working on flights bringing Lebanese citizens back home from countries affected by the coronavirus.

Lebanese workers faced with the prospect of being laid off due to business closures have been appealing for financial help.

“The private sector is living the most difficult and dangerous stage of its history because all the negative factors have hit the country at once, with the latest one being the spread of the coronavirus,” said Mohamed Choucair, president of the Lebanese economic organizations.

“I hope that the general mobilization and the health emergency declared by the government were accompanied by a set of incentives to cut the losses institutions are suffering from in the same way that other countries have,” the former minister added.

He warned that a social explosion would be disastrous for the country.



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Lebanon declares national emergency Coronavirus claims two with nearly 70 cases confirmed in Lebanon

[British ambassador to Kuwait apologizes over embassy coronavirus 'charity' tweet](#)

Thu, 2020-03-19 22:50

LONDON: The British ambassador to Kuwait apologized on Thursday after his embassy staff urged British expatriates stuck in the emirate without money due to coronavirus to seek charity.

In a tweet, that was later deleted, the embassy called on British citizens to reach "friends, family or local charities in Kuwait, such as Bait Alzakat or the Salvation Army" for assistance if they "didn't have enough money."

The tweet was sent as part of a question and answer session held by the embassy for British citizens concerned about the coronavirus.



UKinKuwait   

@ukinkuwait



If you are stuck in Kuwait and you don't have enough money, please seek assistance through friends/family or local charities in Kuwait like Bait Alzakat or Salvation Army.

11:53 · 19 Mar 20 · [Twitter Web Client](#)

1,811 Retweets **1,188** Likes

British ambassador to Kuwait Michael Davenport later tweeted apologetically

that he takes full responsibility for what he described as a “poorly phrased” post.

“Message to British Nationals in Kuwait: the British Embassy is fully operational and totally committed to providing support to British Nationals in Kuwait at this anxious and distressing time.”

2/2 I apologise for one of our tweets during today’s Q&A which was poorly phrased. I take responsibility for that. I encourage all British Nationals to contact us on social media or by calling 22594320 with any concerns. We will respond just as quickly as we can [@ukinkuwait](#)

– Michael Davenport (@DavenportKuwait) [March 19, 2020](#)

Some replied saying the UK should be able to provide financial assistance to its citizens due to the current situation.

“I really feel sorry for the British citizens a great disappointment for them,” wrote one Twitter user.

“I’m really amazed by such a response! What is the rule of the embassy at such circumstances to help their citizens? Kuwait will never hesitate to help,” another user wrote.

“The British embassy should not worry about the British brothers in Kuwait, they are in their country and we are at their service at any time,” said a tweet by a Kuwaiti citizen.

Later, the embassy said it could not provide financial assistance to British nationals and always advised people to take out travel insurance. In certain circumstances the embassy could issue UK nationals with an emergency loan.

Kuwait reported six new coronavirus cases on Thursday, bringing the total to 148.

Kuwait, along with Saudi Arabia, have suspended all international flights and closed most public spaces. Other Gulf states have restricted entry and movement.





UKinKuwait   

@ukinkuwait



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