

Middle East countries report more cases of coronavirus

Mon, 2020-03-09 00:54

DUBAI, BEIRUT: Several Gulf Arab states recorded new cases of the coronavirus on Sunday as 6,900 confirmed cases of the new virus were reported across the region.

Iran has emerged as a center for the disease in the Middle East. It says the new coronavirus has killed 49 more people in the last 24 hours, bringing the death toll to 194 amid 6,566 confirmed cases in the Islamic republic, according to Health Ministry spokesman Kianoush Jahanpour, who gave the figures at a news conference Sunday. In neighboring Kuwait, the Health Ministry reported two more infections, raising the total to 64. Qatari authorities announced three more cases to bring the total to 15.

Kuwait's central bank said on Sunday it was setting up a 10 million dinar (\$32.79 million) fund to support state efforts to fight the virus. Gulf states have canceled or postponed conferences, sporting events and concerts due to the coronavirus outbreak.

Bahrain

The Bahrain Formula One Grand Prix will go ahead on March 22 without fans due to the coronavirus crisis, a blow to the Gulf Arab state's important tourism sector.

Bahrain, which is hosting the second round of the Formula One season at the Sakhir circuit outside Manama, has reported 83 cases of the virus, mostly linked to people who had traveled to Iran.

"Bahrain has made the decision to hold this year's (race) as a participants-only event," organizers said on Sunday.

In the UAE, a Wizz Air press conference in Abu Dhabi, planned on Tuesday, has been canceled, organizers said.

Oman has canceled all events at the Royal Opera House in the capital Muscat that had been scheduled for March and April as well as tours of the site, state news agency ONA said on Sunday.

Syria

Aid agencies are moving to prevent the coronavirus outbreak in conflict-plagued northwestern Syria, where damaged health infrastructure and massive displacement make containment a nearly impossible task.

Syria has not yet confirmed any coronavirus cases but its "fragile health systems may not have the capacity to detect and respond" to an epidemic, Hedinn Halldorsson, a spokesman for the World Health Organization (WHO), told AFP.

The risk of an outbreak is especially high and most alarming in Syria's northwest, where some 3 million people are trapped in a shrinking rebel bastion battered by months of bombardment.

FASTFACT

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With close to 1 million people displaced since December by a Russian-backed regime offensive on the Idlib region, overcrowded settlements are teeming with fresh arrivals, and many of the displaced are sleeping rough in freezing temperatures.

Medical facilities have been targeted during the latest bombing campaign, further reducing the capacity of a health system ravaged by nearly nine years of conflict.

Unable to provide services from government-held territory inside Syria, the WHO provides cross-border assistance to rebel-held Idlib via Turkey, Halldorsson said.

Health personnel are being trained, "and laboratories in both Idlib and Ankara are being prepared and stocked to safely test and diagnose the virus," he added.

A Russian-Turkish cease-fire deal went into effect on Friday, bringing relative calm to Idlib for the first time in months. But many fear the fighting will eventually resume, in a further challenge to efforts to prevent a COVID-19 outbreak.

Misty Buswell of the International Rescue Committee said the situation in Idlib was "especially ripe for a spread" of the virus.

"An outbreak would be devastating for thousands whose health status is already compromised due to lack of sufficient food, clean water and exposure to cold weather," she told AFP.

Buswell said the IRC was focusing on "enhancing preventative measures" by raising awareness, providing medical supplies and strengthening disease surveillance and reporting systems.

"If an outbreak is reported, we will work with local health actors to activate a response," Buswell said.

Mustafa Al-Abdo, the deputy head of Idlib's opposition-run health department, appealed for the formation of an isolated medical center that would be ready to receive cases.

He also called on aid agencies to equip health workers with testing kits, medical masks, gloves and other equipment for prevention.



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Virus hits Bangladesh; Seoul begins drive-thru testing system 'More countries will have to adopt Italy-style virus steps'

[Sudan women decry slow progress on rights since Bashir's fall](#)

Mon, 2020-03-09 00:32

KHARTOUM: Sudanese women were at the forefront of the protests that toppled President Omar Bashir but 11 months on, activists are disappointed at a lack of progress on women's issues.

"Nothing has been done to meet women's demands," said Zeineb Badreddine.

An activist involved from the start of the protest movement that ended Bashir's three-decade rule last April, Badreddine will lead a demonstration in front of the Justice Ministry on Sunday to mark International Women's Day. Almost 30 years after being fired under Bashir for her "progressive ideas," she has also returned to teaching.

But despite the toppling of the Bashir regime, she says the new government lacks female representation.

When Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok formed his government in September, he

vowed to improve the situation for women despite the country's economic and social difficulties.

He allocated four of 17 ministerial positions to women, including the key foreign affairs portfolio. A woman was also named head of the judiciary. But the country's top authority, the joint civilian and military Sovereign Council charged with overseeing the transition to civilian rule, only has two female members out of 11.

"If women had better representation, they would have more voices to defend their cause," said Badreddine.

Under the previous regime, a notorious "public order" law was used to have women publicly flogged or imprisoned for "indecent" dress or for drinking alcohol, seen as "indecent and immoral acts."

Hamdok's government last November revoked the legislation – but many other discriminatory laws remain in place.

HIGHLIGHTS

- **New Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok allocated four of 17 ministerial positions to women, including the key foreign affairs portfolio. A woman was also named head of the judiciary.**
- **Activist decries a lack of legislation criminalizing sexual harassment.**

Badreddine decries a lack of legislation criminalizing sexual harassment. Judges in Sudan also have powers to judge whether or not a woman has been raped, which can sometimes lead to rape victims being prosecuted for adultery.

Lawyer and women's activist Inaam Atiq takes aim at a 1991 personal status law, which she says "is causing the suffering of thousands of women across Sudan."

She says the legislation, inspired by Islamic law, allows 10-year-old girls to be married against their wishes.

"This text must be urgently amended and this can be done without touching Shariah (Islamic law) principles," she said.

Another law forbids women to travel abroad unless they have permission from a male guardian – a measure that even Saudi Arabia has abolished.

"My guardian could be a younger brother that I raised, or even my son," Atiq said.

Nor do courts specializing in personal status issues consider the results of DNA tests, allowing Sudanese men to shirk parental responsibilities and compounding women's problems, she said.

Activist Manal Abdelhalim expresses amazement at "voices, including those of some women, who say that the issue (of women's rights) is not a priority and that it can wait." But Atiq is more hopeful.

"We need immediate measures, and I think that the justice ministry and the government understand the situation," she says. "I am optimistic about the possibility of taking steps in the right direction."



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Sudan central bank says US sanctions on 157 firms lifted US vows to remain engaged with Egypt, Ethiopia, Sudan on Blue Nile dam

[Hospitality gives way to hostility for migrants to Greece](#)

Mon, 2020-03-09 00:28

ATHENS: Five years ago, Greece offered hospitality to a huge wave of migrants at the height of the Syrian civil war – but today, hostility greets those seeking a new life.

Experts put the about-turn largely down to a declining trajectory of global growth as well as crisis fatigue, with the Greek people already having shouldered years of austerity after the financial crisis of a decade ago. Nearly a million refugees made it to Greek islands in the Aegean Sea, just kilometers off the Turkish coastline, in the 2015 exodus, and the majority trekked on to mainland Europe.

Poignant images of local mothers on the island of Lesbos feeding migrant babies went round the world.

The following year, a group of local people from the same island found themselves proposed for the Nobel Peace Prize for their humanitarian efforts. But after Turkey last week gave migrants the green light to head for Europe, feelings have changed on an island that already hosts thousands of migrants from the last wave.

Last time round, "people hoped that the leftist government of Alexis Tsipras, with his humane view on refugees, was going to halt austerity," Filippa Chatzistavrou, professor of political science at Athens University, told AFP. Instead, Greece's economic woes continued.

Today, Chatzistavrou says, many Greeks are still trying to find their feet in an increasingly extreme political environment.

Kostas Filis, director of Greece's Institute for International Relations, said the first migration wave was "spontaneous" as people fled Syria and Daesh.

"Today, Turkey is behind a very much smaller migrant flux looking to come to Greece," he says.

Athens sees Ankara's decision to open the exit gates as "a political weapon," whose result was to see some 13,000 people congregate inside 48 hours on the border post at Kastanies. For Chatzistavrou, "Turkey, seeking western support (in Syria), is behaving more aggressively and the flux of migrants are collateral, a geopolitical means used to alter the balance of power."

FASTFACTS

- **After Turkey last week gave migrants the green light to head for Europe, feelings have changed on an island that already hosts thousands of migrants from the last wave.**
- **Athens sees Ankara's decision to open the exit gates as 'a political weapon.'**

Conservative Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, who has taken a hard line on migration since taking office last July, has ramped up the police and military presence along the Evros (Merik in Turkey) river which straddles the border to prevent an "invasion" and counter the "threat."

Government, media and citizens alike have fallen into a bellicose rhetoric, which aids the cause of "nationalists and the extreme right," said Filis. The latest wave of arrivals has ramped up feelings on the Greek side of the border: There have been several attacks against NGOs seeking to aid the migrants and also against journalists.

The EU has meanwhile expressed strong support for Greece, which last year once again became the main port of call for asylum-seekers in Europe at a time when conditions are already difficult in overburdened camps holding those who arrived previously.

"In five years, patience has run out and that opens the door to violence and hostile speech," warned Maria Stratigaki, a professor of social policy at Athens' Pantion University.

Greece has had to defend itself from criticism from NGOs over decisions to suspend asylum procedures due to Athens' belief that the latest wave is down

to Turkey and not to war.

Government spokesman Stelios Petsas said Greece proved its humanitarian credentials five years ago.

But “the current problem is that Turkey is using people from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Africa to place (Greece) under siege. That’s what we are going to stop. We shall keep the borders shut as long as necessary.”



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Two migrants injured in clashes along Turkey-Greece border Greece blocks 35,000 migrants, plans to deport arrivals after March 1

[Will Idlib cease-fire reflect on Libyan battlefield?](#)

Author:

Mon, 2020-03-09 00:23

ANKARA: The new deal between Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan to bring an end to fighting in Syria’s rebel-held stronghold Idlib is likely to have repercussions for the Libyan

conflict.

The fundamental disagreements between Moscow and Ankara – not only over Syria but also Libya – have yet to be overcome and may again test the limits of the personal ties between the Turkish and Russian leaders.

Turkey's willingness to deliver on its commitments to push the Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham terror group from the de-escalation zone will be affected by the two countries' frozen conflicts as it is still Moscow's red line in Idlib.

On his way back from Moscow, Erdogan told Turkish journalists that he believed Putin would take positive steps on the issue of the Wagner Group in Libya, without disclosing additional details.

He added that he was waiting for problems to be resolved in Libya similar to those achieved with Putin regarding Idlib in Syria.

In Syria and Libya, Russia and Turkey are backing rival parties. Turkey supports Fayed Al-Serraj's GNA in Tripoli while Russia is backing its rival, Haftar's eastern-based Libyan National Army (LNA).

Recently, Erdogan criticized the Russian presence via thousands of Wagner mercenaries in Libya – seen by some as the reason why Turkish-backed opposition fighters from Idlib were sent to the Libyan battleground as retaliation in this battle for regional primacy.

However, in mid-January, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov warned that jihadists were moving from Idlib to Libya to destabilize the North African country.

"Russia considers all armed groups in Idlib as terrorists and this approach also reflects on the Libyan battleground in terms of the Turkey-backed Syrian fighters who were sent there," said Aydin Sezer, an Ankara-based Middle East expert.

"Before initiating a political settlement in Libya, Putin would do his utmost to eradicate jihadists in Libya as he aimed to in Idlib," he told Arab News. According to Sezer, the cease-fire deal between Turkey and Russia requires cooperation between the two countries against terror groups in Idlib, but also in Libya.

"As long as Turkey doesn't want to break ties with Russia, it would take steps for revising its policy in Libya as well because Russia doesn't seem to be tolerant of any commitment that is unfulfilled in terms of fighting terrorism in the region," he said.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) claimed that 6,650 Syrian mercenaries voluntarily went to Libya, mainly from the divisions of Al-Mu'tasim, Sultan Murad, Suqur Al-Shamal Brigade, Al-Hamzat and Suleiman Shah.

According to Samuel Ramani, a Middle East analyst at the University of Oxford, the Idlib deal is a temporary fix and is unlikely to result in a de-escalation in Libya.

"Putin's message was that the Russia-Turkey relationship can survive even if both countries disagree on how to handle conflicts, and that applies to Libya too," he told Arab News.

Ramani thinks that the biggest red line for Russia would not be Turkey adjusting the balance of power in Libya but Ankara's potential targeting of Russian Wagner Group mercenaries.

"Ultimately Turkey can de-escalate in Libya. Its venture in support of the GNA is an uphill struggle, and Turkish involvement in Libya is a lot less popular than in Syria. So more Turkish casualties could lead to Ankara

brokering a settlement with Moscow out of necessity on Libya,” he said.



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Egypt reports death of German national, its first from coronavirus

[Egypt reports death of German national, its first from coronavirus](#)

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Sun, 2020-03-08 14:28

LUX0R: A 60-year-old German tourist has died in Egypt, becoming its first fatality from the new coronavirus, the health ministry in Cairo announced on Sunday.

The man was taken to hospital with fever after arriving in Hurghada from Luxor on March 6, and was placed in intensive care but refused to be transferred to a designated isolation hospital, the ministry said.

Egyptian crew and foreign passengers on a Nile cruise ship on which 45 suspected novel coronavirus cases had been detected disembarked Sunday in the southern city of Luxor.

The health ministry has said the 45 would be quarantined even though 11 of them had tested negative in follow-up tests.

The "A Sara" docked in Luxor days after authorities were alerted that a foreign tourist who had previously disembarked had contracted the virus and infected others onboard.

On Saturday, Health Minister Hala Zayed said 33 people on the ship had tested positive without showing any symptoms.

The health ministry had initially said Friday that another dozen asymptomatic crew had tested positive, but Zayed then said another round of testing had indicated 11 were negative.

She said the 11 would "be isolated for a 14-day follow up" while the 34 positive cases would be kept in an isolation hospital.

The boat was carrying 171 people – 101 foreigners and 70 Egyptian crew – Prime Minister Mostafa Madbouli said Saturday.

He did not specify the foreigners' nationalities but said their respective embassies had been contacted.

It was not immediately clear where the other 126 passengers and crew went after disembarking.

On Sunday, Zayed and other officials traveled to Luxor to follow up on quarantine procedures at the city's airport as part of Egypt's response to the virus, a government statement said.

The city of Luxor, home to some of Egypt's most spectacular monuments, is among the country's top tourist draws.

Besides the cruise ship cases, Egypt has detected three cases of the virus, the first of which was announced on February 14.

The health ministry said last week that the first patient, a Chinese national, had recovered and been released.

The other two cases, a Canadian working in an oil company and an Egyptian who returned from Serbia through France, were still undergoing treatment, according to the ministry.





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Saudi Arabia announces 4 new coronavirus cases