

Israel proposes new restrictions to combat virus surge

Sat, 2021-07-17 01:25

JERUSALEM: Israel is planning tougher health restrictions to combat rising cases of COVID-19 as the delta variant spreads, the prime minister's office said in a statement.

If the new plans are approved by parliament, only those vaccinated or who have recovered from coronavirus will be allowed to take part in indoor events of more than 100 people.

They will also have to wear masks, except for eating and drinking.

The proposal is a joint plan drawn up by the prime minister's office as well as the health and economy ministries.

The Health Ministry has said it would cut quarantine time for those in contact with infected people and for returning nonvaccinated residents from 10 days to seven, following a negative test.

FASTFACT

Israel became a pioneer in COVID-19 inoculations after it obtained millions of doses from Pfizer in exchange for sharing extensive health data on their impact.

Israel became a pioneer in COVID-19 inoculations after it obtained millions of doses from Pfizer in exchange for sharing extensive health data on their impact. Its initial vaccine rollout of the Pfizer-BioNTech jab was among the world's fastest, delivering two doses of the vaccine to more than 55 percent of the population, including about 85 percent of adults.

Case numbers dropped dramatically, and in early June Israel eased many restrictions.

But soon after, as cases rose, the Health Ministry reimposed a requirement for masks to be worn in enclosed public places.

In the past 24 hours, more than 600 cases have been reported, up from around 200 per day on average a week ago.

Prime Minister Naftali Bennett on Wednesday called on Israelis to wear masks in closed public places and to avoid travel.

"The vaccine is not sufficient to fight against the Delta variant (...) we need the cooperation of citizens to defeat the coronavirus without having to impose a new lockdown," he said, calling on children aged 12 to 16 to get vaccinated.



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[Saltwater-grown crops lift food-security hopes of arid Arab countries](#)

Fri, 2021-07-16 22:11

JEDDAH: Conventional agriculture is energy- and water-intensive, especially in countries that rely on desalination to irrigate crops and often import most of their food, amplifying their carbon footprint.

The good news is that a Saudi Arabia startup offers an ingenious, environmentally friendly solution that could ease nations' food worries. Red Sea Farms, which is based on the campus of King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST), near Jeddah, nurtures new breeds of crops that are irrigated with seawater.

Some are grown in greenhouses while others are farmed in open fields. The company cultivates and sells at least a dozen crops, including tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers, celery, eggplant and green beans.

All are sustainable, organic and pesticide-free. The farm will expand its crop range to include around 30 fruit and vegetables in 2021, eventually raising this to about 100.



Traditionally, agriculture in the Kingdom was problematic due to the high cost of the suppling water in a desert landscape. But Red Sea Farms is breaking new ground. (AFP/File Photo)

“It’s about increasing the availability of fresh fruit and vegetables across the world while reducing the carbon and water footprint,” said Mark Tester, a bioscience professor at KAUST and co-founder of Red Sea Farms.

“What we need to do is get plants that now grow on full seawater and turn them into crops.”

Red Sea Farms, which has received \$1.9 million in funding from KAUST, began by building a 2,000-square-meter greenhouse on the university campus. It has now broken ground on a 10,000-square-meter greenhouse nearby.

The first facility has cut its freshwater consumption by 90 percent and also reduced energy use thanks to innovative engineering that improves the process of evaporative cooling.

This is the result of work done by Red Sea Farms co-founder and CEO Ryan Lefers. His solution relies on liquid evaporation to lower the air temperature – in the same way that sweating cools our bodies – and uses far less energy than other air-conditioning methods.

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Saudi Arabia is a waterless and barren land, covered by vast deserts and rugged mountains and therefore unsuited to anything but growing dates. Right? Actually, wrong. [Find out why here.](#)



However, this approach was long ineffective in the Gulf region because of the high relative humidity reducing the rate of evaporation. Lefers created a salt-based desiccant that dehumidifies the air and makes evaporative cooling possible.

The company extracts brackish groundwater from a nearby borehole to irrigate its crops and run the air-conditioning system. In Saudi Arabia, most freshwater is obtained via desalination, which is energy-intensive and expensive, so switching to groundwater has slashed the farm's carbon footprint.

Red Sea Farms is also developing open-field saltwater-grown plants. "That's where the plant science comes in more to create new types of crops," said Tester.

The principle is to get plants already growing in very salty water, or even seawater, and domesticate them to turn them into new varieties. Much of this work is being done at KAUST's desert agriculture center.

For example, salicornia (sometimes known as sea asparagus) has an oil-rich

seed that could be used for cooking and as a lubricant. Tester and his colleagues are improving it genetically so that it can become an economically viable crop.

“Your cooking oil in 10 years’ time could be made from salicornia,” he said, noting that oil seeds occupy a huge amount of land and have an enormous carbon footprint.



A general view taken from an airplane shows cultured farms in northern Saudi Arabia. (AFP/File Photo)

Having been selectively bred for thousands of years to improve their yield and hardiness, the wheat or corn seeds farmers use today are vastly different from their wild ancestors.

“We can turbocharge those processes through genomics but also through machine-learning algorithms to help accelerate that breeding process,” Tester said. “We’ve an opportunity now that we’ve never before had in human history to get some of these wild plants which have extraordinary properties and turn them into crops.”

The company aims to extend its footprint worldwide. Over a three- to five-year timeframe, the expansion will be focused on covered agriculture (the greenhouse) but will shift more to open-field agriculture five to 10 years from now.

Tester said: “This is a fantastic region in which to develop, test and deliver this technology. It’s a perfect incubator for this type of activity. Having got ourselves technically and financially ready, we want to go global.

North and sub-Saharan Africa are on our doorstep and will be excellent regions to expand into, both in terms of impact and business potential.”



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How Saudi Arabia is charting a path toward food security

[Fears of environmental disaster in Red Sea grow as UN-Houthis talks on Safer tanker fail](#)

Author:

Fri, 2021-07-16 22:01

ALEXANDRIA: The UN will continue talks with Iran-backed Houthi rebels until they agree to allow its experts to begin a vital assessment of the floating oil tanker Safer, and also urged the rebels to be more cooperative.

“We are continuing our efforts to send a team to the FSO Safer,” UN spokesman

Farhan Haq told Arab News, adding that the primary goal of the UN salvage expedition was to assess the damage and conduct "light" maintenance to prevent the tanker from crumbling.

"This is what we said a month ago about this: 'The United Nations is committed to its planned mission to assess the Safer oil tanker, conduct light feasible repairs to reduce the risk of a spill and formulate evidence-based recommendations for a permanent solution.'"

The UN official was responding to Arab News' request to comment on Houthi accusations that the UN was responsible for delays in the arrivals of the mission for allegedly breaching an agreement with the rebels.

On Thursday, the Houthi-controlled Safer Agreement Committee (SAC) blamed the UN Office for Project Services (UNOPS) for the failure of talks to repair the floating tanker after insisting on carrying out a "mere visual inspection work" rather than addressing the issue once and for all.

"The committee regrets the failure of UNOPS to comply with the agreement signed in November 2020 and its insistence on wasting time and wasting donors' funds allocated to the project in fruitless meetings," the Houthi committee said in a statement carried by the official Houthi news agency.

Carrying more than 1 million barrels of crude oil and moored off the Yemeni Red Sea coast for almost four decades, the FSO Safer tanker has decayed during the past six years due to lack of regulator maintenance, which ended when the Houthis seized control of the western city of Hodeidah.

The Houthis have backtracked many times on promises to allow the UN mission to visit the tanker, first accusing the UN mission of including agents from America and Arab coalition member states, and later rejecting the signing of a written security guarantee to protect members of the mission.

The latest move by the Houthis prompted the UN to announce in February that it was delaying its mission indefinitely.

Given the large load of the tanker, experts have long described it as a ticking time bomb that could explode at any time or leak oil, causing a major environmental disaster worse than the Exxon Valdez oil spill in Alaska in 1989.

The Yemeni government has accused the rebels of using the tanker as a "pressure card" to blackmail the government and the international community, and for leverage during peace talks.

Yemen's Foreign Minister Ahmed Awad bin Mubarak told the Kuwaiti news agency KUNA last week that the UN should take tougher measures against Houthi officials who derail the arrival of the UN mission to the tanker.

"The failure to achieve progress in the (Safer) oil tanker file is due to the failure of the international community and the Security Council to use effective tools of pressure, including sanctions against the Houthi militia and its leadership responsible for the file," the minister said.



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Dozens injured in Lebanon as protests turn violent amid rising tensions
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Fri, 2021-07-16 20:44

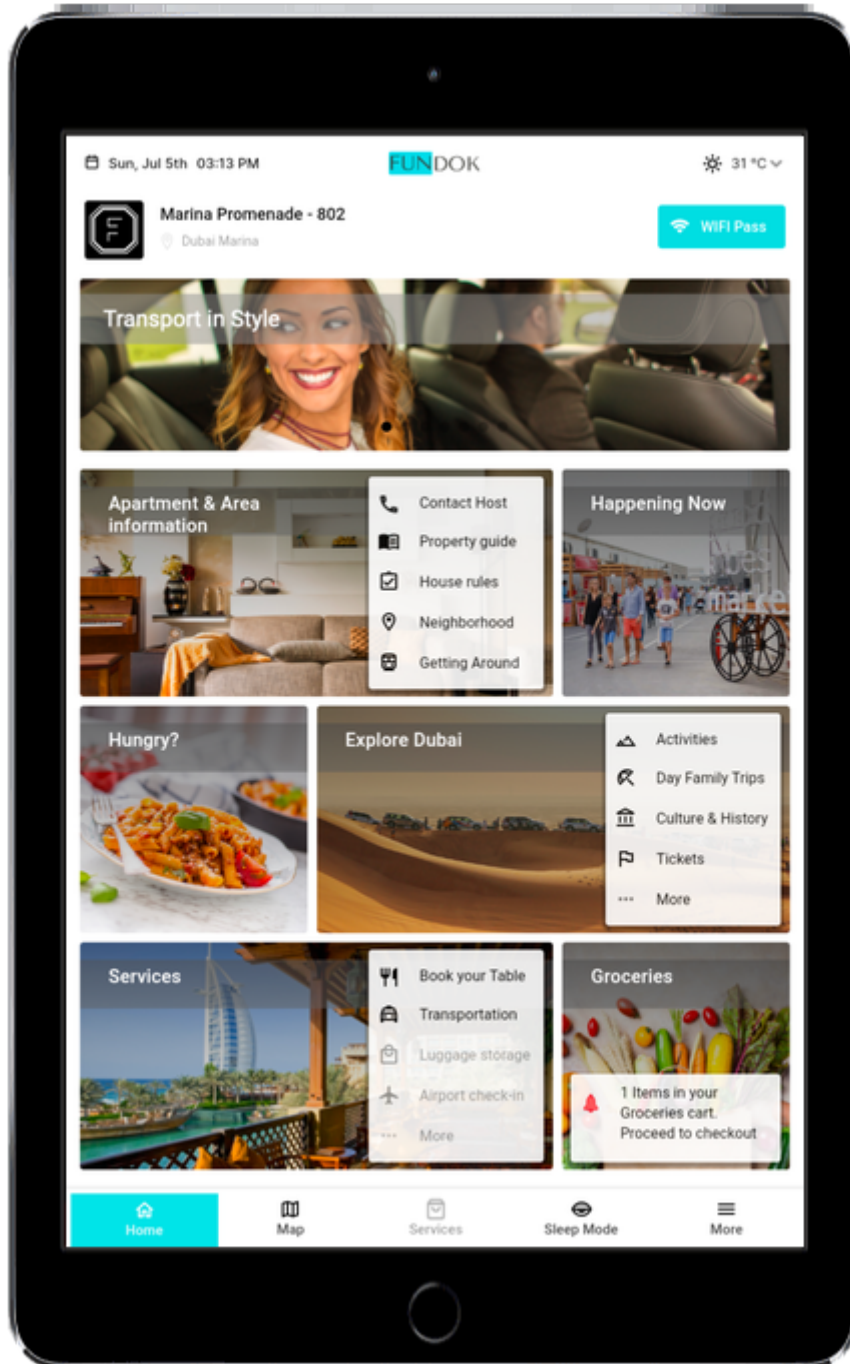
CAIRO: Travel has been one of the most severely affected sectors during the coronavirus pandemic. With many countries closing their borders and introducing lockdown measures to contain COVID-19, the industry witnessed its worst performance in decades.

Between January and March 2021 destinations around the world welcomed 180 million fewer international arrivals compared with the first quarter of last year. Asia and the Pacific continued to suffer the lowest levels of activity with a 94 percent drop, followed by Europe (-83 percent), Africa (-81

percent), the Middle East (-78 percent) and the Americas (-71 percent).

This all follows on from the 73 percent fall in worldwide international tourist arrivals recorded in 2020, making it the worst year on record for the sector, according to UN World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) figures.

Yet, there are signs of recovery, with many in the travel tech sector already adapting to the changing needs of travelers and some even thriving in the new normal.



Fundok, a newly launched digital solution platform for the hospitality sector, expanded its offerings to meet the changing needs of today's traveler. (Supplied)

The pandemic has brought about significant changes in the way people move about. Rana Dababneh, founder of Pomalo Travel, said that although she sees

far fewer travelers today, those who do travel want to go to safe and remote destinations.

“Even from early on in the pandemic, we could see that the face of travel will change,” she said. “We started looking at destinations that offer natural isolation, and are full of wilderness and nature experiences, away from cities.”

For this boutique travel agency in Amman and Dubai, the Maldives was the top destination in 2020 because of its remoteness and natural appeal. However, with countries frequently updating their travel restrictions, people are becoming wary about taking a journey.

“It’s also about trust in the system,” said Dababneh. “If I travel, I need to know that I can come back. It’s not only about COVID-19 but about things not getting complicated.”

Indeed, according to a recent survey across 12 countries, respondents in the UAE were concerned about border closures while traveling and having to quarantine in their destination. In fact, they were more worried about having to quarantine than the risk of catching the virus, either on a flight or while abroad, the survey found.

INNUMBERS

*** 73 percent – Drop in worldwide international tourist arrivals in 2020.**

*** 78 percent – Drop in tourist arrivals in Middle East destinations.**

While the pandemic hit the industry severely, it also prompted travel tech startups to turn to technology in this new age of travel.

Trift, a travel platform that encourages sustainable destination experiences, launched virtual tour guides during the pandemic for people to preview destinations from the comfort of their homes.

“We have used this downtime to pivot to a new offering that will help people plan better for their next holiday after the pandemic,” said co-founder Tarun Krishna.

“We also wanted to support our community of local guides and travel content creators by launching ‘Virtual Experiences,’ an interactive travel discovery and planning experience available in both on-demand and live formats.”

As a result, Krishna recently piloted a project with the Institute for Development of Bonito in Brazil to digitally support tourism in the country. The venture makes natural experiences accessible to everyone while also paving the way for paid on-demand virtual experiences to support local tour guides.



At a time when contactless interactions are preferred and guests want less contact with people, digital solutions are proving valuable. (Supplied)

Meanwhile, Fundok, a newly launched digital solution platform for the hospitality sector, expanded its offerings to meet the changing needs of today's traveler. In addition to providing destination insights and content, it recently developed a range of digital services, including check-ins/check-outs, room guides and concierge services.

All are available on tablets in rooms and apartments as well as on guests' mobile phones. "We moved from service-based to holistic experience solutions," said Mohamed Nassar, the platform's co-founder.

At a time when contactless interactions are preferred and guests want less contact with people, these digital solutions are proving valuable. So far, the startup has boosted its portfolio by about 300 percent and recently expanded to Cairo.

Nassar is optimistic about the future. "There has been much said about the doom and gloom, but we are all still here. Businesses are much more resilient and adaptive to the current environment than we think. Nothing is easy, but we're hopeful for 2021," he said.



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Startup of the Week: Firnas Aero; Advancing toward modern technology, one drone at a time

[Dozens injured in Lebanon as protests turn violent amid rising tensions](#)

Fri, 2021-07-16 20:01

BEIRUT: Riots left more than two dozen people injured in Tripoli on Friday, including 10 soldiers, as tensions continued to rise in Lebanon.

“The situation seems to be getting worse, and things are about to escalate because we are facing a difficult political and social fate,” said Lebanese Armed Forces Commander Gen. Joseph Aoun as he inspected army units deployed

to the Bekaa Valley.

Meanwhile the international community continued to call for progress in the country's stalled political process. France, the EU and the US have urged Lebanese politicians to form a new government as a matter of urgency, and an international conference is being planned to support the efforts.

"All concerned parties need to work with urgency to put in place a government that's able to implement reforms immediately," US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Thursday night in a message posted on Twitter.

The Arab League said its secretary-general, Ahmed Aboul Gheit, and his UN counterpart, Antonio Guterres, had agreed during a meeting in New York that the situation in Lebanon is going from "bad to worse."

The former said he hoped that "the international community will succeed in helping the Lebanese overcome the crisis."

As he inspected his forces on Friday, Aoun told them: "Our responsibility is great at this stage. We are required to preserve the security and stability of the homeland and prevent chaos."

BACKGROUND

The Arab League said its secretary-general, Ahmed Aboul Gheit, and his UN counterpart, Antonio Guterres, had agreed during a meeting in New York that the situation in Lebanon is going from "bad to worse."

He said he considers the military to be "the only institution that is still active," and added: "The army is the deterrent to chaos. I know that you will not allow anyone to invade our land, and you will not allow these circumstances to make you lose your sense of belonging to your homeland, your identity and your land.

"What we are experiencing today is a temporary crisis and it will pass."



Private companies and institutions allowed employees to leave work early on Friday so that they could get home before roads were blocked.

Angry crowds took to the streets for a second consecutive day to protest against fuel shortages and the continuing steep rise in the dollar exchange rate on the black market.

Demonstrations had broken out across the country on Thursday, immediately after Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri announced his resignation after nine months of failed wrangling with President Michel Aoun over the formation of a new government.

The previous government resigned in August last year amid protests in the aftermath of the devastating explosion at Beirut's port.

The Lebanese currency hit new lows in the wake of Hariri's announcement, with dollars changing hands on the black market at a rate of more than 22,500 Lebanese pounds on Friday. The official government rate is just over 1,500 pounds.

The protests grew more fierce and violent on Friday, especially in poorer areas of Tripoli, such as Jabal Mohsen. Protesters destroyed property and burned tires. The army intervened, firing shots to disperse them.

According to the Lebanese Red Cross, dozens of civilian protesters were wounded as the army fired rubber bullets and rocks were thrown. Al Jazeera photographer Khaled Habshiti was injured by a grenade in Jabal Mohsen. The Red Cross said it sent three teams to help treat and move the wounded.

The angry activity and chaos on the streets stood in stark contrast with the state of inertia and anticipation that prevails on the political scene.

President Aoun has not yet set a date for parliamentary consultations to choose new prime minister designate to replace Hariri and resume the efforts to form a government. They are not expected to take place until after the Eid Al-Adha holiday next week.

Aoun said on Friday that "he will overcome the difficult circumstances." He added that "nothing can bring the Lebanese down, even with all the hardships they are going through," and he promised to "make all efforts to resolve the successive crises."

Joanna Wronecka, the UN's special coordinator for Lebanon, described the stalemate between Hariri and Aoun as a "setback" and expressed deep regret over "the inability of Lebanon's leaders to reach agreement on the formation of a new government that is urgently needed to address the challenges."

Adding that "there is no more time to lose," she called for "swift measures to ensure the designation of a new prime minister, in line with constitutional requirements."

Wronecka also stressed the need to form a government able to implement the reforms required to put Lebanon on the road to economic recovery ahead of free and fair elections in 2022.

The US State Department expressed concern over Hariri's resignation. It said: "The political class need to put aside partisan differences, instead of trading blame, to form a government capable of addressing this concerning situation."

The EU's foreign policy chief, Josep Borrell, said he regrets "the ongoing political gridlock in the country and the lack of progress in the implementation of the urgent reforms."

The National Federation of Employees' and Workers' Trade Unions in Lebanon called on "workers, farmers and low-income members to form local committees whose mission is to prepare for civil disobedience."

The federation described this as "the perfect, and only, option to bring the political class down and hold it to account in the streets."

It added that politicians are responsible for "the lowest points of the economic collapse: starvation, death, poverty, unemployment, and a salary lower than \$30."

The volatile dollar exchange rate caused chaos in Lebanese retail markets. Many shop owners decided to close their stores because they were unable to set a stable price for goods. Other sellers put the sale of their products on hold avoid losses.

A black-market money changer told Arab News: "Trade has been limited to selling dollars, as people are eager to make profits."

He added that he has been surprised by the "continuous increase of the dollar exchange rate, controlled by the electronic platforms, despite the low demand

for it.”

The protests continued on Friday night and were not limited to pro-Hariri Sunni areas; they also took place in communities that traditionally support Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri and his party, the Amal Movement.

An Amal supporter in Zokak Al-Blat told Arab News: “Aoun considers himself victorious. This must not persist.” He added that the president “must know that the resentment of the people is really great. He previously destroyed the country in order to remain president and what happened then? The same thing will happen now. He must not think, even for a second, that he is capable of controlling everything.”

A number of people in Beirut told Arab News that “the promise the president made to us has become true: we are living in hell.”

Tony, who owns a bakery, said: “If the situation persists, my family and I will starve. I laid off an employee because I was no longer able to pay him. The dollar exchange rate on the black market has reached 25,000 pounds and there is not one official that feels what we are going through.

“They told us we were headed to hell. They were right. This is hell. But what is next? Are there no solutions?”

Nadia, a Lebanese woman who was standing outside a public institution, said: “They all claim that they are worried about the country’s fate and that they are defending their sects and their interests.

“We do not want anything from them. Let them leave us alone. We cannot take it anymore.”

Mohammed, the owner of a barber shop, said: “The country is divided into two groups. The first group of people can take it because they are getting paid in fresh dollars. The second group, the one I belong to, is not even capable of leaving this cursed country.

“Politicians only care about their interests. The president is insisting on his son-in-law as the next president and Hezbollah controls us.”



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US calls resignation of Lebanon PM-designate 'disappointing'