



People throw stones during anti-government protest following Tuesday's massive explosion which devastated Beirut, Lebanon on Aug 9. (AP)

News in Brief

RAMALLAH: Palestinian Health Minister Mai Al-Khaleil said Sunday 277 new COVID-19 cases have been recorded in the last 24 hours, reaching a total of 18,651.

She said, in a press statement, that 172 out of the 277 new cases registered are from the city of Khalil (Hebron). In addition, 239 recovered cases were also recorded, but no fresh deaths were reported, she said, adding that three patients were put on breathing machines. (KUNA)



Al-Khaleil

TEHRAN: Iran shut down a newspaper on Monday after it published remarks by an expert who said the official figures on coronavirus cases and deaths in the country account for only 5% of the real toll.

Mohammad Reza Sadi, the editor-in-chief of Jahane Sanat, told the official IRNA news agency that authorities closed his newspaper, which began publishing in 2004 and was mainly focused on business news.

On Sunday, the daily quoted Mohammad Reza Mahboobfar, an epidemiologist the paper said had worked on the government's anti-coronavirus campaign, as saying the true number of cases and deaths in Iran could be 20 times the number reported by the Health Ministry. He also said the virus was detected in Iran a month earlier than Feb 19, when authorities announced the first confirmed case. He said they held up the announcement until after the commemorations of the anniversary of the 1979 Islamic Revolution and parliamentary elections earlier that month. (AP)

DUBAI: The UAE Ministry of Health announced on Sunday that 225 more people tested positive for the novel coronavirus (Covid-19) over the last 24 hours.

The latest figures bring this Gulf country's overall count of confirmed infections with the infectious respiratory illness to 62,525 so far, the ministry said in a press statement.

It also confirmed that a single fatality due to the viral disease, taking the UAE's death toll up to 357, according to the statement, carried by the country's official news agency (WAM). (KUNA)

DOHA: The Qatari Ministry of Health announced on Sunday that 297 more people tested positive for the novel Coronavirus (Covid-19) over the past 24 hours.

The latest figures bring this Gulf country's total number of confirmed infections with the globally spreading illness to 112,947, the ministry said in a press statement.

The ministry also confirmed two additional fatalities due to the highly contagious illness, taking the country's death toll to 184 so far. (KUNA)

MUSCAT: Omani health authorities on Sunday recorded 223 new COVID-19 cases, taking the total cases to 81,580.

Omani official news agency cited a health ministry statement saying that 148 citizens and 75 expatriates were hit by the virus, adding that

74,691 of the 81,580 cases have been cured.

The death toll due to the virus in the Gulf sultanate remained at 513 deaths, according to the ministry. (KUNA)

BAGHDAD: The Iraqi Health Ministry announced Sunday that 82 cases succumbed to COVID-19 and 2,726 new infections, which bring the total of confirmed cases to 150,115 and death toll to 5,392.

Baghdad has the largest number of COVID-19 cases with 550, Erbil 285 and Basra 243, while the rest of patients are from other governorates, said a ministry statement.

It added that 2,271 recovered from the infection, raising the total to 107,775 recovery cases. (KUNA)

AMMAN: Jordan recorded Sunday six COVID-19 cases, increasing the number of confirmed cases to 1,252 and nine recovery cases.

Jordanian Premiership and Health Ministry said in a joint press release that health authorities conducted around 6,000 tests adding the total to 646,400 since the outbreak of the pandemic. (KUNA)

TEHRAN: Iranian health authorities on Monday confirmed 189 additional fatalities and 2,132 more cases of the novel Coronavirus (Covid-19).

The fresh figures bring Iran's death toll and overall infections with the viral illness up to 18,616 and 328,844 respectively, the Iranian Health Ministry's Spokeswoman Sima Sadat said in a press statement.

In addition, a total of 286,642 patients have been cured of the globally spreading virus so far, the spokeswoman pointed out. (KUNA)

ANKARA: Fifteen patients died due to the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) and 1,182 people tested positive for the virus in the past 24 hours, Turkish Health Minister Fahrettin Koca said Sunday.

These figures raised the total death toll to 5,844 and the infections to 240,804, Turkey's Anadolu Agency quoted Koca in a press statement as saying.

The number of recoveries went up by 1,103 to 223,759, he added. (KUNA)

RABAT: The Moroccan health ministry on Saturday announced 19 deaths and 1,345 infections of COVID-19.

The ministry, in the daily briefing, said that the number of total infections surged to 32,007 while deaths came to 480.

It added that total recoveries reached 22,190 after recording 642 new cases. (KUNA)

TUNIS: Tunisian Health Ministry on Saturday reported 22 infections of COVID-19, taking the caseload to 1,678 and 51 deaths.

The Ministry indicated that it carried out 1,382 tests in the last 24 hours and recoveries are at 1,259. (KUNA)

ADEN: Yemen's coronavirus taskforce said Sunday that three patients has died from Covid-19 virus, and seven new infections were confirmed in Hadhramaut and Taaz governorates.

The higher committee taskforce said in a statement, that three fatalities were reported in Hadhramaut, including three recoveries. (KUNA)

World donors demand change before money to rebuild Beirut

Over 30 participants offered help

Priests recount 'horror' as blast rocked church

BEIRUT, Aug 10, (AP) — The video shows Father Rabih Thomy swinging a chain censer sending smoke into the air when abruptly there is a rumble and then a loud bang as the shockwave from Beirut's devastating explosion slams into the church.

Thomy darts for cover as stained glass and other debris fall from above. The camera tips over, coming to rest focused on a carpeting of glass shards covering the floor.

The world witnessed fleeting glimpses of the horror wrought on the Lebanese people on Tuesday through videos that circulated widely online, among them that dramatic footage as Thomy celebrated Mass via livestream from Saint Maron-Baouchrieh church.

"If we hadn't run quickly ... we would have been more badly hurt," Thomy, who suffered minor injuries on his head from the glass, told The Associated Press. "God has saved us."

The Tuesday evening mass — only about 10 people were present with the church closed to worshippers amid the coronavirus pandemic — had begun just minutes earlier when the church started shaking. Then it felt like it was swaying.

Church priest, Father Marwan Mouawad was chanting off-camera when the lights went out and the glass rattled and then came crashing down. A gust of dusty wind — "like a storm," he said — buffeted him as shards fell on his back. A nun was also injured in the head.

"For a second we thought it was an earthquake," Mouawad said. "Then we thought it could be an explosion targeting a politician."

It was neither. The massive blast was apparently the ignition of 2,750 tons of ammonium nitrate, a chemical used for explosives and fertilizer, that had been stored at the Beirut port.

At least 160 people were killed and thousands injured with many more left homeless in a devastating blow to a city and country already reeling from severe economic turmoil and the coronavirus pandemic and related woes.

Inside the church, wooden pews that in normal times would have been full of worshippers were left littered and deep-

ly scratched by the jagged glass.

"If there were (more) people," Mouawad said, "we would have definitely seen deaths."

When he finally left the church, he found what he likened to a "ghost city" of blown-out buildings and damaged cars. Later he learned that many members of the church's congregation had been injured elsewhere.

Like other faith communities around the world, the church was already struggling due to the pandemic. It closed to worshippers before reopening with limited capacity, and then closing again as cases increased in the country. Donations and collection plate money have dried up as parishioners increasingly struggled to stay afloat themselves.

Now, it faces increased needs from congregation members, many asking for help with food, medicine or repairing homes damaged by the explosion.

While the church has yet to begin its own repairs due to financial constraints, it reopened Friday to worshippers with limits on numbers. Only a smattering of the faithful attended service that day. Some didn't know early enough that the church had reopened; others may have been scared, said Mouawad. There were tears and shock.

"They all said the same thing: 'Thank God that He has saved you.'"

Even before the blast, Lebanon has struggled.

"We see our people dying. We see our people going hungry," Mouawad said. "We try to do the work but we have very limited capabilities. ... We cannot replace the role of the state," which is not meeting the people's needs, he said.

But amid hardship he still sees God's work, such as in the man who recently called offering to donate food for the needy just when the church had run out of supplies for its twice-a-week soup kitchen.

"If there was no faith, we wouldn't have been able to remain steadfast despite all these crises," he said. "The people say 'we rely on God and God will, for sure, not abandon us.'"



Lebanese priest Marwan Mouawad, speaks during Sunday Mass at Saint Maron-Baouchrieh Church that was damaged by last Tuesday's explosion that hit the Beirut seaport, in Baouchrieh neighborhood in Beirut, Thomy says: 'God has saved us.' (AP)

BEIRUT, Aug 10 (AP): World leaders and international organizations pledged nearly \$300 million in emergency humanitarian aid to Beirut in the wake of the devastating explosion, but warned on Sunday that no money for rebuilding the capital will be made available until Lebanese authorities commit themselves to the political and economic reforms demanded by the people.

Over 30 participants to the international conference offered help for a "credible and independent" investigation into the Aug 4 Beirut explosion, another key demand of the Lebanese crowds who took to the streets Saturday and Sunday.

In Beirut, two Lebanese Cabinet ministers, including a top aid to the premier, resigned amid signals that the embattled government may be unraveling in the aftermath of the devastating blast that ripped through the capital. The blast killed 160 and wounded 6,000, raising public anger to new levels.

The resignation of Information Minister Manal Abdel-Samad, in which she cited failure to meet the people's aspirations and last week's blast, was followed by a swirl of reports that other ministers were also resigning.

Late Sunday, Environment Minister Demanios Kattar resigned, calling the ruling system "flaccid and sterile."

He stepped down despite closed-door meetings into the evening and a flurry of phone calls between Prime Minister Hassan Diab and several ministers following Abdel-Samad's announcement. The political haggling had appeared to put off more resignations, and a Cabinet meeting is planned Monday.

If seven of the 20 ministers resign, the Cabinet would effectively have to step down and remain in place as a caretaker government.

Maha Yahya, the director of the Beirut-based Carnegie Middle East Center, said the discussions clearly point to backroom deals that seek to put together a new government that's acceptable to domestic and international powers, as well as the angered public.

The current government "really has been a lame duck," she said, unable to undertake any reform or show independence in a highly divisive political atmosphere. "Even the ministers are deserting the sinking ship."

Meanwhile, four more lawmakers announced Sunday they were resigning from the 128-seat parliament, joining four others who declared it earlier. Parliament is also due to convene later this week.

As the political negotiations took place, protesters converged again on the parliament area Sunday afternoon, setting off another night of violent demonstrations. Hundreds of protesters clashed with security forces, attempting to breach the heavily-guarded parliament. Security forces responded with tear gas and chased the protesters in the streets of downtown, in a smaller repeat of scenes from the night before.

The protesters blame the ruling elite

for the chronic mismanagement and corruption that is believed to be behind the explosion in a Beirut Port warehouse. Hundreds of tons of highly explosive material were stored in the waterfront hangar, and the blast sent a shock wave that defaced the coastline of Beirut — destroying hundreds of buildings.

The final statement from participants at Sunday's donor conference co-organized by France and the United Nations read: "In these horrendous times, Lebanon is not alone."

The teleconference participants promised emergency aid — focusing on medicine and hospitals, schools, food and housing.

The donors pledged the aid will be coordinated by the UN and delivered directly to the Lebanese people — in a clear indication that no money is going to the government and its coffers.

French President Emmanuel Macron, whose country once governed Lebanon as a protectorate, said, "We have to do everything we can so that violence and chaos do not win the day."

"The explosion of August 4 was like a thunderbolt. It's time to wake up and take action. The Lebanese authorities now have to put in place ... political and economic reforms."

Amid the conference participants were President Donald Trump, Jordan's King Abdullah II, Egypt's President Abdel Fattah el-Sissi and other top officials from China, the European Union and the Gulf Arab countries.

At the angry demonstrations Saturday, protesters set up gallows and nooses in central Beirut and held mock hanging sessions of cut-out cardboard images of top Lebanese officials.

Demonstrators held signs that read "resign or hang." One police officer was killed and dozens of people were hurt in confrontations that lasted for hours and where security forces used rubber bullets to disperse the crowds.

On Saturday and in a new expression of rage, protesters also fanned out around the city, storming a couple of government ministries and briefly declaring the Foreign Ministry as the headquarters of their movement. In the economy and energy ministries, the protesters ransacked offices and seized public documents claiming they would reveal how corruption has permeated successive governments.

In the country where civil war raged for 15 years, few, if any, have been held accountable for it and most of the warlords remain in power or leading powerful political factions.

On Sunday, France's ambassador to Lebanon said his country is taking part in the investigation of the Aug. 4 blast. Bruno Foucher tweeted that 46 officers are operating as part of the judicial investigation. That probe was started by a French prosecutor after a national of France, Jean-Marc Bonfils, was killed in the blast and others injured.

It is "a guarantee of impartiality and speed" in the investigation, Foucher tweeted.

The government, backed by the powerful militant Hezbollah group and its allies, announced it is defaulting on Lebanon's sovereign debt and has since been engaged in difficult, internally divisive talks with the International Monetary Fund for assistance. The coronavirus restrictions deepened the impact of the economic and financial crisis and fueled public anger against the new government.