

Syria so far not hit at scale feared

Iraq faces full local lockdowns as virus cases jump

BAGHDAD, May 19, (Agencies): Iraq will impose a complete lockdown on some areas of the capital, the country's new health minister said on Monday, amid an uptick in coronavirus cases in recent weeks since curfew hours were relaxed.

The new government under Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi was sworn into power just two weeks ago following a five-month leadership vacuum. Responding to the pandemic and a severe economic crisis brought on by falling oil prices is foremost on its agenda.

Areas of Baghdad believed to play a role in spreading the virus will face a full lockdown as of Wednesday for a period of two weeks, Health Minister Hassan al-Tamimi said in a statement.

The areas lie in Baghdad's peripheries and are mostly impoverished and over-crowded. They include Sadr City, Habibia, Hurriya, Shula, Ameria, and Kamalia.

Al-Tamimi said in the statement the measures were taken in view of the rising number of cases in recent weeks and to stem the spread of the virus, according to the statement.

Meanwhile Iraq declared on Monday recording four deaths and 150 infection cases with the novel coronavirus (COVID-19), the highest daily proportion of such cases since the pandemic broke out in the nation.

Iraqi Ministry of Health said in a statement whole number of infection cases climbed to 3,554 throughout the country including Kurdish regions.

It said among the 3,554 infections, there were 127 deaths and 2,310 recoveries.

Monday is the second consecutive day Iraq witnesses record hike of infections -- by local standards. Yesterday's count of the contaminations with the deadly bug amounted to 144

The number of confirmed cases per day has risen since curfew hours were relaxed during the holy month of Ramadan from 5 p.m. to 5 a.m. Before curfew hours were relaxed, only between 22-30 new infections were being reported daily.

Sudan's health emergency committee also said it will extend the lockdown of its capital, Khartoum, and the surrounding province for two weeks, starting on Tuesday.

The strict order was renewed as the number of known infections jumped to 2,591 in the country, stoking fears that more cases will overwhelm the state's dilapidated health system. The curfew bars citizens in Khartoum from visiting families in far-flung provinces and potentially bringing the virus with them during Eid al-Fitr, the three-day festival that marks the end of the Islamic holy month of Ramadan.

Meanwhile, the U.N. special envoy for Syria on Monday said the pandemic "has so far not hit Syria at the scale initially feared - but also fears that it still could do so."

Geir Pedersen told the U.N. Security Council that the officially reported number of cases is 64 in Syria, of which 58 are in government-controlled areas and 6 are in the northeast, but he cautioned that testing has been limited. No cases have yet been reported in the northwest, the last rebel-held stronghold, he said.

Pedersen called for unimpeded humanitarian access across conflict lines to deliver assistance, including to prevent and protect against the outbreak in government-controlled areas, in the northwest, and in the northeast "where gaps in medical supplies have widened."

He again urged the Syrian government and all other combatants to follow the example of other governments in the region and elsewhere and initiate the release of detainees held by both sides in the conflict.

Schools back in September

Eid shutdown in Turkey

ISTANBUL, May 19, (Agencies): Turkey's president has announced a new four-day curfew during the Muslim holiday of Eid al-Fitr to be applied across the country to stem the spread of COVID-19.

Speaking after a cabinet meeting, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said he hoped the restrictions would no longer be needed after the next round of lockdowns between May 23 and 26. Previous weekend and national curfews were applied to a maximum of 31 provinces but this round will restrict people to their homes in all 81 provinces.

The country has opted to impose short weekend and holiday curfews, instead of full lockdowns, fearing possible negative effects on the already troubled economy.

Turkey's health ministry announced 31 new deaths in the past 24 hours, the lowest since the end of March, bringing the death toll to 4,171. The data also showed 1,158 confirmed new infections, with the total now at 150,593.

People aged over 65 and under 20 have been under full lockdown. Erdogan announced that older people will be allowed out for several hours Sunday for the third week running, while everyone else is inside. Children and teenagers will be allowed out for a second time this week, at allotted days and times.

The school year has ended, Erdogan said, and will resume in September. A ban on travel to and from 15 major cities, including Istanbul, was extended for an additional 15 days.

News in Brief

TEHRAN: Iranian authorities announced, on Tuesday, 62 deaths due to the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) in the last 24 hours, bringing the total succumbing to the virus to 7,119.

A Health Ministry official said that the number of those who contracted COVID-19 reached 124,603 in the country after 2,111 new cases were registered.

Those who recovered from the virus reached 97,173. (KUNA)

RABAT: Morocco decided Monday to extend the lockdown for three weeks as the Ministry of Health registered 82 new coronavirus cases in the past 24 hours.

Prime Minister Saaduddin Othmani, addressing a parliamentary session, said the government decided to extend the lockdown for three weeks, until June 10, to continue efforts to curb the spread of the virus.

He attributed the extension decision to the good results achieved so far.

"We cannot take the risk in lifting the lockdown in this stage ... because it might result in setback," he said.

The ministry of health said the 82 new cases increased infections to 6,952.

It added no deaths were reported since yesterday, while 98 people recovered to raise recoveries to 3,758. (KUNA)

TUNIS: The Tunisian Ministry of Health announced on Monday that six persons more tested positive for the novel coronavirus (Covid-19) in the past 24 hours, bringing the overall infections to 1,043.

Five of the cases involve recent arrivals who have been quarantined and the sixth one is a locally transmitted, the ministry said in a press release.

A Covid-19 patient has died in Al-Mahdiya province, bringing the deaths from the pandemic to 46 while three patients have recovered, pushing the overall recoveries 819, according to the statement.

Last Monday the Tunisian authorities relaxed the lockdowns and allowed some businesses to reopen after the daily rate of infections dropped to nil, but the pandemic cropped up in the country on Friday. (KUNA)

BEIRUT: Lebanon declared on Monday recording 20 new coronavirus infection cases raising the toll of contaminations with the pandemic to 931.

Lebanese Ministry of Health said in its daily update that no deaths with the contagion were reported in past 24 hours, thus the tally of fatalities remained at 26.

Recoveries reached 252, it said, adding that health personnel conducted 945 tests for the virus in past 24 hours. (KUNA)

AMMAN: Jordanian Ministry of Health Saad Jaber said Monday 16 people tested positive for the novel coronavirus to raise infections to 629.

He told a news conference seven infectees came into close contact with previously-infected persons, four Jordanian truck drivers who came from abroad, three citizens traveling from Malaysia and two in the lrbid.

Jaber said five people recovered from the virus. (KUNA)

ADEN: Yemen Monday said two persons were diagnosed positive of the novel coronavirus, Covid-19, in the past 24 hours.

The national committee tasked with confronting the pandemic said total infections rose to 130 after the registration of two cases in the eastern governorate of Shabwa.

It added in a statement 20 persons have died of the virus. (KUNA)

Egypt



In this May 9, 2020 photo, 28-year-old defender Mahrous Mahmoud holds up his Egyptian national football team jersey he trains with, inside his home, in Manfalut, a town 350 kilometers (230 miles) south of Cairo in the province of Assiut, Egypt. Mahmoud should be on the field at this time of the year playing as a defender for Beni Suef, a club in Egypt's second division. But like millions in the Arab world's most populous country, he has been hit hard by the coronavirus pandemic. (AP)



This May 9, 2020 photo, shows printed photographs of football defender 28-year-old Mahrous Mahmoud, during football training at a club, in Manfalut, a town 350 kilometers (230 miles) south of Cairo in the province of Assiut, Egypt. (AP)



In this May 9, 2020 photo, 28-year-old football defender Mahrous Mahmoud, from left, his father 56-year-old Mahmoud Mahrous, his 20-year-old brother goalkeeper Hossam Mahmoud, and their uncle 60-year-old Mohammed Mahrous, pose for a photograph inside their home, in Manfalut, a town 350 kilometers (230 miles) south of Cairo in the province of Assiut, Egypt. (AP)

'Those like me and my family have to survive'

Pandemic turns Egyptian soccer player into vendor

MANFALUT, Egypt, May 19, (Agencies): On a hot Saturday afternoon, Mahrous Mahmoud is busy as can be. The professional soccer player, however, is working up a sweat in a different way these days - as a street vendor.

At this time of the year, Mahmoud would be on the field playing as a defender for Beni Suef, a club in Egypt's second division. But like millions in the Arab world's most populous country, he has been hit hard by the coronavirus pandemic.

These days, he heads to work in a crowded market in an Upper Egypt town. Shoulder-to-shoulder, shoppers jostle around stalls as he prepares a pancake-like pastry. Prior to the pandemic, Mahmoud made about \$200 a month playing for his club. That went a long way toward feeding his family of three but he also did part-time jobs to supplement it.

The league was shut down mid-March and Mahmoud's main source of income dried up. Egypt has implemented a strict curfew and closed cafes, malls and other shops as part of a government effort to stem the spread of the virus. His club told players to stay at home until they could return to playing.

That's not an option for Mahmoud, or many others in the Nile River region of Assiut. His family has to eat.

"I should do any kind of work to help feed them," he said. The market in Manfalut, a town 350 kilometers (230 miles)

south of Cairo, has remained open throughout the pandemic, bustling as shoppers buy provisions for the evening meal that breaks the daily fast during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan. The small pancakes that Mahmoud makes, called qatayef in Arabic, are among the most favorite Ramadan desserts.

Mahmoud returned to his hometown not long after the country's partial lockdown was implemented. He looked for jobs but could only find work as a daily laborer in construction. Before the crisis, he said he could find regular work on construction sites, usually making no more than \$7 a day, but now he says he's lucky if he can get two days of work a week. Then came Ramadan, and the temporary job at the pastry stall.

In Manfalut, where most of the residents are daily laborers, staying at home and social distancing are not viable. In rural and poor parts of Egypt, many have taken a fatalistic approach to the pandemic, because they consider the cure worse than the disease. Should the virus gain a foothold here, it could spread fast.

Like many other places in the world, the repercussions of the pandemic were disastrous for most of Egypt's 100 million people, particularly in the south. Even before the virus crisis, poverty has swelled because of austerity measures taken by President Abdel Fattah el-Sissi's government, part of reforms to overhaul the country's battered economy.

Prior to the outbreak, one out of every three Egyptians, or roughly 33 million people, were living on about \$1.45 per day.

The 28-year-old Mahmoud is the eldest of two sons. His father worked as a part-time driver but is retired with heart problems. He supports his father, mother and brother, who live in one room of a three-story building they share with six other families of his uncles.

Mahmoud showed athletic talent from a young age. He started as a boxer in a local club, then moved on to handball, before coaches convinced him to join the club's soccer team. By 16, he went professional.

"They told me I would be a good defender," said Mahmoud, whose teammates nicknamed him Kompany after former Manchester City captain Vincent Kompany.

However, Mahmoud sees Liverpool defender Virgil van Dijk as his role model.

Mahmoud helped his team to the top of its league, and he hopes to advance to the country's top division.

In the meantime, he'll just have to keep working, despite the dangers. There's his family, and another reason to save - Mahmoud had been scheduled to get married next month.

"Nobody is immune," he said. "But those like me and my family have to survive."