

UNRWA's financial crisis sparked by loss of US funding

Refugee agency warns of instability amid crisis

BEIRUT, Sept 17, (AP): The UN agency for Palestinian refugees is experiencing a financial crisis that could force it to halt some services to an already impoverished population of more than 5 million people, the head of the agency said Wednesday.

Philippe Lazzarini also warned in an interview with The Associated Press in Beirut that the spread of coronavirus, an economic meltdown in Lebanon and a huge deficit in UNRWA's budget are deepening the hopelessness among Palestinian refugees, some of whom are trying to flee the Mediterranean nation on migrant boats. UNRWA was established to aid the 700,000 Palestinians who fled or

were forced from their homes during the war surrounding Israel's establishment in 1948. It now provides education, health care, food and other services to 5.8 million refugees and their descendants in the West Bank, Gaza, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon.

UNRWA's financial crisis was sparked by the loss of all funding from the United States, its largest donor, in 2018. The US gave \$360 million to UNRWA in 2017, but only \$60 million in 2018, and nothing last year or so far this year.

US President Donald Trump said in January 2018 that the Palestinians must return to peace talks with Israel to receive US aid money. He has since

put forth a plan for resolving the conflict that heavily favors Israel and was rejected by the Palestinians.

"I do believe that ceasing our activity in a context where there is such a level of despair, such a level of hopelessness, can only fuel the feeling that the Palestinian refugees are abandoned by the international community," said Lazzarini, who took office in March.

Lazzarini said supporting UNRWA "is one of the best investments in stability in the region at a time of extraordinary unpredictability and volatility."

"We cannot let the situation get worse in a highly volatile region," he said.

The Swiss humanitarian expert said UNRWA is facing an estimated shortfall of about \$200 million between now and the end of 2020 if the agency wants to maintain all the services in its five fields of operations, including schools, health centers and social welfare.

Lazzarini said the coronavirus is having "a huge economic and financial impact also on our donor base." He said most donor countries are in recession at a time when Palestinians need even more aid because of the pandemic and various lockdowns.

UNRWA has registered 6,876 confirmed cases among Palestinian refugees, most of them in the West Bank,

where some 5,000 cases have been detected. Lebanon, which hosts tens of thousands of Palestinians, registered 430 cases in refugee camps.

"We have people being more and more in despair expecting UNRWA to deliver more services, at a time UNRWA is already experiencing financial crisis," Lazzarini said. "It makes it much, much harder to mobilize the necessary resources."

Lazzarini on Wednesday discussed conditions of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon with President Michel Aoun and outgoing Prime Minister Hassan Diab. Aoun called for the return of Palestinians who fled to Lebanon in recent years from Syria's civil war.

The U.N. official said he met with Palestinians in refugee camps during his visit to Lebanon who spoke about their hardships amid the country's worst economic and financial crisis in decades. Lebanon's local currency has lost 80 percent of its value, wiping away the life savings of Lebanese and Palestinians alike.

"There is a really deep sense of hopelessness and despair today in the Palestinian camps," he said, adding that some families have been forced to cut back on food purchases.

"I believe that despair and hopelessness in a situation like this one can indeed lead to violence and to instability," he said.

Briefs

DUBAI: The United Arab Emirates said on Thursday coronavirus cases increased by 786 to 82,568.

No fatalities were registered as the death toll remains unchanged at 402, state news agency, WAM, quoted health authorities as saying.

Meanwhile, some 661 people were cured from the virus, raising the total recoveries to 72,117. (KUNA)

MUSCAT: The number of confirmed coronavirus cases in Oman rose by 557 to a total of 91,753, the health ministry said on Thursday.

A total 84,648 people have been cured, while the death toll stands at 818, read a ministry statement carried by the state news agency, ONA. (KUNA)

DOHA: Qatar health authorities confirmed Thursday 244 new positive cases of Coronavirus (COVID-19) while no deaths were recorded in the past 24 hours.

The authorities said in a statement that the total cases increased to 122,693, adding that all new cases have been quarantined and taking necessary treatment.

It pointed out that 213 recoveries were recorded, bringing the total number of recoveries from the virus to 119,613 cases. (KUNA)

CAIRO: The Egyptian Ministry of Health reported that 160 people tested positive for the novel coronavirus (Covid-19) and 17 others succumbed to the illness over the past 24 hours.

The figures took the overall infections and death toll to 101,500 and 5,696, respectively, the ministry's spokesman Dr Khaled Mujahed said in a press release.

The recoveries went up by 804 to 86,549, he added. (KUNA)

ANKARA: In Turkey 1,771 cases of Coronavirus were reported in the past 24 hours bringing the tally to 296,391, Turkish Health Minister Fahrettin Koca said Wednesday.

Koca added that 1,342 patients recovered from COVID-19 over the past day.

Meanwhile, the death toll in the country reached 7,249, as 63 more people lost their lives.

Healthcare professionals conducted 112,645 more tests to diagnose the disease over the last 24 hours, pushing the tally to over 8.85 million.

"Today, the world is in a more difficult phase of COVID-19 than at the beginning of the pandemic," Koca said, adding that vaccine studies will show positive results by the end of the year.

Koca stressed 51.6 percent of the beds in hospitals were occupied, intensive care units are working at 66.3 percent capacity and 33.6 percent of the ventilators are being used. (KUNA)

ALGIERS: Algerian Ministry of Health declared on Wednesday recording 13 new deaths for contracting the dreaded germ, COVID-19, during past 24 hours.

Dr. Jamal Forar, spokesperson of the monitoring and follow-up committee on the pandemic locally, said in his daily briefing that the caseload of the cases rose to 48,966, in addition to a total of 1,645 deaths.

He also reported 159 new recuperation cases raising number of people who were discharged from hospitals and quarantines to 34,517.

However, 31 patients have remained in intensive care units. (KUNA)

RAMALLAH: Palestine announced recording 963 new coronavirus cases, 15 deaths and 552 recoveries in the past 24 hours.

The new figures raised the total number of deaths to 276 and infections to 42,379, Palestinian health ministry said in a statement.

There are 30 patients currently in ICUs, it added.

The rising numbers of infections and deaths are causing concern, Prime Minister Mohammed Ashteya has remarked, adding that the authorities are considering new measures to fight the pandemic.

In the same context, authorities banned entry to Al-Aqsa Mosque for three weeks starting Friday, in an attempt to limit infections. (KUNA)

RABAT: The Moroccan Health Ministry on Wednesday announced 38 new deaths of the novel coronavirus and 1,692 infections in 24 hours.

These numbers took the death toll from the virus to 1,686 and the infections to 92,016, said a ministry statement.

It noted that some 1,921 people recovered from the disease, bringing the tally to 72,986. (KUNA)



Dozens of Palestinians flash the victory sign as they protest against their permanent settlement in Lebanon and demanding immigration, near the US embassy in Aukar, northeast of Beirut, Lebanon. The financial crisis that the UN agency for Palestinian refugees is experiencing could lead to ceasing some of its activities in what would raise risks of instability in this volatile region, the head of the agency said on Sept 16. (AP)

COVID hits Lebanese 'prison' as inmates jockey for release

Overcrowding jails main problem

BEIRUT, Sept 17, (AP): Lebanon's largest prison on Thursday was grappling with an alarming coronavirus outbreak, as many inmates refused to take preventative measures or get tested under the impression that catching the virus could speed up their release as part of a rumored general amnesty, the head of the country's doctors union warned.

Over 200 of the 3,000 detainees at Roumieh prison have tested positive in recent days, Sharaf Abu Sharaf, president of Lebanese Order of Physi-

cians, told The Associated Press.

The outbreak in the prison east of Beirut, which is notorious for overcrowding, comes as Lebanon is witnessing a sharp increase in coronavirus cases and deaths. Some detainees' families have urged the state to issue amnesty to certain detainees to reduce the possibility of the virus sweeping through the country's prison population.

"Overcrowding is the prison's main problem," Abu Sharaf said, adding that the 223 detainees who tested positive were being quarantined in a separate building inside the prison compound. He said the vast majority of detainees had minor or no symptoms, and small number had been taken to a nearby hospital for treatment.

Some observers say the spread of the virus in Lebanon is being used to pressure the government to implement a general amnesty for prisoners.

Hundreds have been jailed for years without trial, while others who've served their prison terms but don't have enough money to pay fines are still being held. Prisoners locked up for serious cases like killing members of Lebanon's security forces or drug dealing are not likely to be included in any amnesty.

A video apparently leaked from inside Roumieh prison and posted on social media showed dozens of detainees packed in a hall, none of them wearing masks, with one saying: "We are dying inside the prison. There is no food or medicine. There is no protection here."

Another video showed four men sleeping on mattresses, some of them coughing, with the video's narrator claiming that they were infected with COVID-19. The videos could not be independently verified, but claimed to be from inside Roumieh.

Abu Sharaf said that since the virus spread to Lebanon earlier this year, prisoners have been supplied with masks and sanitizers to protect themselves. Outgoing Health Minister Hamad Hassan told reporters that the ministry and prison officials are coordinating to guarantee the safety and medical care of all prisoners.

In April, prisoners rioted in a jail in northern Lebanon demanding that they be released amid fears of the virus.

Outgoing Justice Minister Marie-Claude Najm said 2,717 detainees have been released from March 1 through Sept. 1 from prisons and detention centers around Lebanon as a result of expediting their cases. She added that detainees who are serving prison sentences can fill out applications asking for a special amnesty.

"For the first time in Lebanon's history, we are doing electronic questioning," Najm told the local LBC TV, adding that this has led to the release of detainees who were held without trial.

Lebanon, a nation of 5 million, has recorded a sharp increase in registered cases in recent weeks, with 634 new cases on Wednesday alone. The latest figures pushed the total number of cases to 26,083 since the first reported infection in late February, while deaths have reached 259.

The rise began after a lockdown was eased and the country's only international airport was reopened in early July.

Cases shot up dramatically days after the Aug. 4 explosion of nearly 3,000 tons of ammonium nitrate stored at the port of Beirut. The blast killed 192 people, wounded some 6,500 and left a quarter of a million with homes unfit to live in.

The blast overwhelmed the city's hospitals and also badly damaged two hospitals that had a key role in handling virus cases.

Dr. Firas Abiad, a doctor leading the fight against coronavirus, said 8% of all tests are coming back positive.

Deadly 2015 arson

Israeli minor gets 3-1/2 years in jail

JERUSALEM, Sept 17, (AP): An Israeli court sentenced a young man on Wednesday to 3-1/2 years in prison for his role in the 2015 arson attack that killed a Palestinian toddler and his parents in the West Bank village of Duma.

The unidentified youth, who was a minor at the time of the attack, was found guilty last year of membership in a terrorist organization and involvement in a racially motivated crime.

It was the second sentencing this week by the Lod District Court in the deadly 2015 Duma arson attack.

On Monday, the court handed Amiram Ben-Uliel, a Jewish settler, four life sentences for the killing of 18-month-old Ali Dawabseh in a firebomb attack on the family's home. The toddler's mother, Riham, and father, Saad, later died of their wounds. Ali's brother Ahmad, 4 years old at the time, survived the attack.

The attack came amid a wave of vigilante attacks on Palestinians in the occupied West Bank by suspected Jewish extremists. The deadly firebombing in Duma touched a particularly sensitive nerve, drawing condemnation from across Israel's political spectrum.

Ben-Uliel belonged to a movement known as the "Hilltop Youth," a leaderless group of young people who set up unauthorized settlement outposts, usually clusters of trailers, on West Bank hilltops - land the Palestinians claim for their hoped-for state.

The Hilltop Youth have been known to attack Palestinians and even to clash with Israeli soldiers in response to perceived moves by the government to limit settlement activity.

Later in 2015, Israel faced a wave of stabbing, shooting and car-ramming attacks by Palestinians. Most were carried out by lone attackers with no connection to militant groups.

In Wednesday's ruling, the Lod court said the convicted youth will have the 32 months spent in detention while awaiting trial counted toward his 3 1/2 year sentence.

In another incident, The Israeli military struck Hamas militant sites in the Gaza Strip early Wednesday in response to rocket fire toward Israel the previous night that coincided with the signing of normalization agreements between Israel and two Arab countries at the White House.

The barrage against Israel began Tuesday night just as the ceremony in Washington was getting underway to formalize the new agreements with the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain. Two Israelis were lightly wounded.