

Virus exposes health gap in Tunisia as doctors deplore lack of equipment

Author:

Thu, 2020-09-03 00:45

EL-HAMMA: The coronavirus pandemic has put the spotlight on struggling health services in southeast Tunisia, with residents and doctors in a COVID-19 hotspot deploring a lack of equipment and medics.

The North African country had managed to contain its outbreak by moving early and imposing strict measures in March, but cases have been on the rise since it reopened its borders on June 27.

Gabes province, and especially the town of El Hamma, some 500 km south of the capital Tunis, has become one of the country's virus epicenters.

More than 800 of Tunisia's almost 4,000 coronavirus cases and 11 of its 80 deaths have been recorded in Gabes region – mostly from El Hamma – in August alone, according to the Health Ministry.

Most cases have been asymptomatic, but residents of the agricultural town of some 100,000 people fear they will be unable to access treatment if needed.

"Our hospitals need to be hospitalized, urgently!" Fethi, a resident in his thirties of El Hamma, where a lockdown has been reimposed, said.

The local hospital has no intensive care beds, and the army set up a field hospital in mid-August to screen suspected cases.

Those in need of hospitalization are usually sent to regional capital Gabes, around 30 kilometers away and home to more than 400,000 people. But the situation there is only marginally better.

The main regional hospital in Gabes has just two respirators for COVID-19 patients, and two intensive care doctors for the whole hospital – but the pair only treat non-coronavirus cases.

"We have no intensive care staff for COVID patients," said Hamida Kwas, head of respiratory medicine at Gabes regional hospital.

It has just 16 intensive care beds, and all eight beds in the regular coronavirus ward are occupied.

Hospital director Hechmi Lakhrach said he fears a "catastrophe."

Health Ministry officials are aware of the lack of resources, equipment and staff, but "nothing has been done," he said.

Public health has declined in Tunisia over the past two decades, faced with poor management and corruption, and eroded by an increase in private

facilities. Many trained doctors go abroad to work.

Services are also unequally distributed: 13 of Tunisia's 24 provinces have less than one intensive care bed per 100,000 inhabitants, according to a study on the marginalization of Tunisia's central and southern regions.

Kwas said staff and equipment shortages were "exhausting us morally and physically. We are really afraid of not being able to go on."

Donations from individuals and companies have improved some of Tunisia's facilities, particularly since the start of the novel coronavirus outbreak.

But even hospitals that have benefited are still sometimes inadequately equipped. At the Gabes hospital, donations allowed the creation of screening rooms for suspected coronavirus cases.

But these are not in use due to lack of equipment, said Imen Rejeb, head of the emergency department.

She said suspected coronavirus cases were being hospitalized in the Covid-19 ward alongside confirmed cases, risking contamination.

"We have no oxygen supply ... no respirators, no nurses. We have nothing," Rejeb said.



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Tunisian parliament to vote on new government Tunisia PM designate will form a

[Syria intercepts Israeli strike on air base: state media](#)

Author:

Wed, 2020-09-02 23:55

DAMASCUS: Syrian air defenses on Wednesday intercepted missiles fired by an Israeli warplane at an air base in central Syria, state news agency SANA said, in the second such Israeli strike this week.

“An aircraft belonging to the Israeli enemy fired this evening a number of missiles... toward the T4 air base and our air defenses intercepted most of them,” SANA said citing a military source.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights confirmed the attack on the air base in Homs province saying Israel was “likely” responsible.

Wednesday’s attack was the second this week, after Israeli strikes on Monday killed one civilian, three government troops and seven allied foreign fighters, according to the Observatory, a war monitor.

Monday’s strikes hit Syrian army positions south of Damascus as well as positions belonging to Iran-backed paramilitaries, including fighters of the Lebanese Hezbollah movement, in the southern province of Daraa, the Observatory said.

Israel has carried out hundreds of raids in Syria since the civil war broke out in 2011, targeting Iranian and Hezbollah forces as well as government troops.

The Israeli army rarely acknowledges individual strikes, but said that on Aug. 3 it had used fighter jets, attack helicopters and other warplanes to hit Syrian military targets in southern Syria.

Hezbollah’s leader Hassan Nasrallah warned on Sunday that the group would kill an Israeli soldier for each of its fighters slain by the Jewish state, after one of its combatants was killed in an Israeli strike in Syria on July 20.



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Syria's air defenses intercept Israeli missiles: state media
Lebanon 'an open door' to Syrian arms smugglers

[US envoy joins calls for drastic reform in Lebanon](#)

Author:

Wed, 2020-09-02 23:52

BEIRUT: US Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs David Schenker called on Lebanon's leaders to implement drastic and wide-ranging reforms as he launched a two-day visit to the crisis-stricken country on Wednesday.

Schenker said that he wants to see reforms that "respond to the Lebanese people's desire for transparency, accountability and a government free of

corruption.”

Diplomatic sources told Arab News that Schenker’s program of meetings is “unusual and unexpected.”

The US official will meet civilian and business leaders for talks related to US aid after the Beirut port explosion on Aug. 4.

Schenker’s arrival follows French President Emmanuel Macron’s second visit to Lebanon during which he made any French bailout conditional on widespread reforms.

Macron gave Lebanese officials “15 days to form the government and eight weeks to implement the promises.”

In a press release, the French leader said: “If you honor your commitments, we will honor ours. Otherwise, there is no blank check and we will not be able to support Lebanon.”

He also said that if the new leadership failed to honor its commitments, “those hindering these efforts will be named.”

Macron managed to bring together rival party officials at the Residence des Pins, the French ambassador’s residence, for a meeting attended by Saad Hariri (Future Movement), Walid Jumblatt and his son Taymour Jumblatt (Progressive Socialist Party), Gebran Bassil (Free Patriotic Movement), Samir Geagea (Lebanese Forces), Mohammed Raad (Hezbollah), Samy Gemayel (Kataeb), Sulaiman Frangieh (Marada) and Ibrahim Azar (Nabih Berri bloc).

Mustapha Adib, Lebanon’s prime minister-designate, said on Wednesday he wants to swiftly form a government of specialists to implement urgent reforms that can regain the trust of the Lebanese and the international community.

Earlier the 48-year-old diplomat held talks with MPs over the formation of a new crisis Cabinet.

During the talks the Future Movement called for “the swift formation of a government of specialists,” while the Hezbollah bloc said it wanted to see a government that is “effective, productive and coherent, and understands the political reality.”

However, Berri’s bloc insisted on keeping the finance portfolio as a “fundamental matter” amid signs of a looming dispute over who will take over the Ministry of Finance.

The Progressive Socialist Party called for “a capable government that makes reforms first, starting with the French initiative which is the last chance.”

The Lebanese Forces’ bloc demanded a government that is “independent, made of specialists and committed to neutrality,” and also announced that the party will not be part of government.

Meanwhile, the Free Patriotic Movement called for “rotating ministries,” with

a reassignment of portfolios allocated for other parties.

MP Osama Saad described the events as “the new look of an expired system.”

“The crises and collapses will not stop in Lebanon,” he said.

Following the talks, Adib said that “there is more common ground among the Lebanese than points of disagreement, which can be resolved by dialogue.”

After a meeting with the Maronite Patriarch Bechara Boutros Al-Rai on Wednesday, the Maronite patriarchs called for “a salvation government that does not have any party or political affiliation, with the necessary exceptional powers to be able to make reforms, combat corruption and achieve economic advancement.”

The patriarchs said that “Arab and international concern should be a building block for Lebanon’s salvation.”



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Lebanon PM designate pledges to form ‘expert govt’ in record time
Lebanon leaders have promised cabinet within two weeks, says Macron

US: Turkey-sent Syrian fighters generate backlash in Libya

Author:

By SAMY MAGDY | AP

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Wed, 2020-09-02 20:11

CAIRO: A US report said the presence of thousands of Syrian mercenaries sent by Turkey to Libya to fight on the side of the UN-supported government was likely to degrade security and generate backlash from the Libyan public.

The US Defense Department's inspector general also said in a new report that it was concerned about the growing presence of Russian mercenaries fighting for the rivals of the Tripoli-based government in the Libyan war.

The report, which was released Tuesday, said Turkey has sent to Libya at least 5,000 Syrian mercenaries who previously worked closely with Ankara in Syria's civil war. They were sent to help Tripoli-allied militias fight the forces of east-based military commander Khalifa Haftar.

Turkey also deployed several hundred regular troops to Libya, including operators and technicians for Turkish air defense systems deployed in western Libya, the report said.

While the Syrian mercenaries have bolstered the UN-supported government's position, "their continued presence will continue to negatively affect the overall security situation in Libya," said the report, which covers the second quarter of 2020.

Libya was plunged into chaos when a NATO-backed uprising in 2011 toppled longtime dictator Muammar Qaddafi, who was later killed. The country has since split between rival east- and west-based administrations, each backed by armed groups and foreign governments.

Haftar's forces launched an offensive in April 2019 trying to capture Tripoli. But his campaign collapsed in June when the Tripoli-allied militias, with heavy Turkish support, gained the upper hand, driving his forces from the outskirts of the city and other western towns.

Fighting has died down in recent weeks, but both sides were preparing for a possible battle over the strategic city of Sirte, the gateway to Libya's major oil fields and export terminals, controlled by Haftar.

The chaos has worsened in recent months as foreign backers increasingly intervene, despite pledges to the contrary at a high-profile peace summit in Berlin earlier this year. Thousands of mercenaries including Russians, Syrians and Sudanese are fighting on both sides of the conflict.

The US Africa Command, or AFRICOM, described the Syrian mercenaries fighting with the Tripoli-based government as "inexperienced, uneducated, and motivated by promises of considerable salary." It said Turkish private military company Sadat has overseen supervision and payment to the mercenaries.

Increasing reports of theft, sexual assault and misconduct by Syrian mercenaries in western areas are likely to further degrade the security situation and generate backlash from the Libyan public, AFRICOM said.

The report says extremists with previous militant links have been involved in the Tripoli fighting, although “it is possible they were fighting for financial and personal reasons rather than ideological reasons.” Protests took place over deteriorating economic conditions last month in the capital and elsewhere in western Libya, which is controlled by forces loyal to the UN-supported government. Tripoli militias opened fire on demonstrators with rifles and truck-mounted guns and abducted some of the protesters. The US military has grown increasingly concerned about Russia’s growing influence in Libya, where at least 3,000 Russian mercenaries and 2,000 Russia-sponsored Syrian mercenaries backing Haftar’s army, the report said.



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Turkey to hold military exercise off Cyprus amid Mediterranean tensions
Turkey detains top Daesh member

Israel to withhold bodies of all Palestinian militants

Author:

Wed, 2020-09-02 23:14

JERUSALEM: Israel decided Wednesday to withhold the bodies of all slain Palestinian militants in a bid to deter attacks, a move slammed by rights groups as “barbaric.”

Prior to the decision, approved by the government’s security cabinet, Israel retained the bodies of militants only from Hamas, the rulers of Gaza.

The new policy would see Israel not return the bodies of any Palestinian killed during or as a result of an anti-Israeli attack.

Defense Minister Benny Gantz welcomed the cabinet’s decision, which he said was part of a broader campaign of “deterrence.”

“Not returning terrorist bodies is part of our commitment to the safety of Israeli citizens, and of course to returning the boys home,” he said, referring to the remains of two Israeli soldiers held by Hamas in Gaza since a 2014 war.

Hamas is also believed to be holding two Israeli citizens who entered Gaza alone and whose families say have mental health issues.

The decision came two days after the latest Qatari-mediated deal between Israel and Hamas to end more than three weeks of cross-border attacks.

The deal was condemned by Leah and Simcha Goldin, the parents of one of the soldiers missing in Gaza.

“The money will be transferred to Gaza, the crossings and fishing zone will open. And the boys? The boys will remain there some more,” they wrote on Twitter.

Rights group Adalah called Israel’s decision “extreme, barbaric” and “illegal.”

“The policy of using human bodies as bargaining chips violates the most basic universal values and international law which prohibit cruel and inhuman treatment,” they said in a statement.



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Hamas, Israel agree to cease-fire over border violence Israel strikes Hamas in Gaza over rockets, fire balloons