

Student spearheads Syrian education drive on dangers of COVID-19

Author:

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DUBAI: An engineering student is spearheading a major campaign to educate people living in Syria on the dangers of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic.

Omar Bozo, 24, has been the driving force behind the Akmha (sanitize it) initiative, set up in Damascus in mid-March to raise awareness about the virus and help prevent its spread.

Dedicated teams of students, volunteers, and physicians have been working around the clock to offer vital health services that have attracted more than 240,000 followers on the group's Facebook page alone.

Bozo moved from Saudi Arabia to Syria in 2014 and is currently studying engineering informatics at the Arab International University, located 32 kilometers from the capital.

The idea of helping his fellow citizens came about when officials announced the closure of schools, universities, and workplaces on March 14.

"We were afraid of the coronavirus and how it was affecting other countries. My friends and I did not have classes or any activities, but we had free time and we said that we could do something," he said.

The pandemic has hit Syria at a particularly difficult time, with the nation suffering serious economic stress caused by the ongoing internal war that erupted in 2011.

Bozo pointed out that the health system in Damascus was not prepared for COVID-19, a situation that has heaped pressure on already packed hospitals. In addition, a lack of polymerase chain reaction (PCR) testing has led to an inaccurate number of infections.

According to the World Health Organization, as of Aug. 16 there had been 1,593 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and 60 related deaths in Syria. However, analysts believe the numbers are likely to be much higher.

One of the Akmha collective's first outdoor activities, between March and May, involved heading out onto the streets – especially crowded places such as bus stations – to distribute hand sanitizers to passengers and passersby, place soap and usage instructions at several public water fountains, and disinfect narrow streets in selected neighborhoods.

As well as cleaning family homes, the group recently began a disinfection program at Damascus University. With the new academic year getting underway in September, launching a campaign to curb the spread of COVID-19 in schools

was also in the pipeline.

Another of Bozo's and his colleagues' goals was to provide much-needed, large oxygen tanks for respiratory support, a target that has remained a challenge due to supply shortages and inflation concerns in the country.

However, thanks to donations from individuals and organizations, the team has been able to secure more than 400 refillable tanks.

A medical team has also been formed, consisting of around 20 hospital doctors who daily volunteer to man emergency phone lines, make home visits, and provide free consultations for people requiring medical assistance.

Operating from a modest center inside an old Arabic courtyard house in Damascus, the dedicated Akmha team has continued to deliver its services throughout Syria despite often being overwhelmed with requests for help.

Over time, the group has gained popularity on social media, and now has more than 240,000 followers active on its Facebook group and page, the latter of which is regularly updated with advice on COVID-19 precautionary measures and the daily activities of on-the-ground teams.

Bozo said that Syrian society was coming to terms with the grim consequences of COVID-19, with people becoming more responsible and cautionary.

"In the beginning, there was denial and conspiracy theories, but the situation has completely changed now. People who were ridiculing the virus grew afraid of it and those who mocked facemasks started wearing them.

"The main reason is because people witnessed this danger in their own homes and of others too," he added.



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UN Syria talks resume after virus cases forced suspension

[Cairo express buses' fast lane to the future](#)

Author:

Fri, 2020-08-28 01:52

CAIRO: Egypt is looking to speed up the introduction of electric and gas-powered express buses on Cairo's ring road in a bid to ease traffic congestion and reduce pollution in the capital.

The Ministry of Transport plans to run the buses in dedicated lanes, with bus stops at major intersections.

Cairo, Giza and Qalyubia have formed a joint committee to implement the so-called BRT (bus rapid transit) project and oversee its operation.

Kamel Al-Wazir, Egypt's transport minister, said the BRT buses will offer a connection between different modes of transportation.

Buses will run in their own lanes unobstructed by other traffic, an approach similar to that adopted in other capitals.

A ministry source said the high-frequency buses will likely be introduced after expansion work on the ring road is completed.

The ministry plans to expand the ring road to include up to eight lanes in each direction.

Transport expert Magdy Essam said that ticket prices will reflect companies' operating costs and profit margins, and will not be supported by the government.

The planned buses will connect with the Cairo metro network at Adly Mansour Station in Salam in the fourth phase of the recently opened third line and the Rawd Al-Farag Corridor station in Giza in the third phase of the third metro line, Essam said.

Automotive expert Gamal Askar said the buses first appeared in the late 1970s and quickly became popular in major cities. The electric-powered vehicles can carry up to 4,000 passengers per hour.

According to Askar, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi believes the bus service will help Cairo – one of the world’s worst cities for motor vehicle pollution – to improve its air quality.

Askar said that Egypt has laid more than 8,000 km of asphalt in the past six years, improving the efficiency of roads, cutting travel time and helping to reduce fuel consumption.

The ring road will include eight lanes, with two internal lanes allocated for buses, he said.

Buses will be equipped to carry passengers with special needs.

Transit time on the roads should be reduced and the waiting time for passengers will be minimal. A double bus will be able to carry about 170 passengers, he said.



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From September, everyone arriving in Egypt must present negative COVID certificateGreece ratifies Mediterranean maritime border pact with Egypt

From September, everyone arriving in Egypt must present negative COVID certificate

Author:

Fri, 2020-08-28 00:42

CAIRO: In mid-August, Egypt's Ministry of Civil Aviation implemented a ruling that all foreign nationals arriving at Egyptian airports must present a negative PCR analysis taken no more than 72 hours before their arrival.

Since that time, sources at Cairo International Airport told Arab News that they have turned away 25 passengers for failing to present proof of having tested negative for novel coronavirus (COVID-19).

Earlier this week, the Egyptian government announced that, from Sept. 1, Egyptian nationals returning to the country will also be required to present the same documentation upon arrival.

The Civil Aviation Authority has sent a message to all airlines operating in Egypt outlining the new rules. Only children under the age of six are not required to present the PCR test certificate.

According to the sources, any passenger arriving without the required documentation will be deported immediately on the same plane, and legal action will be instigated against the airline that allowed the passenger to board its plane without the necessary certificate.

The negative PCR analysis is just one of the steps those arriving at Cairo Airport must undergo in order to enter Egypt, the sources said.

Smart thermal cameras inside the arrival halls also scan everyone's temperature and anyone suspected of having COVID-19 is examined by the airport's medical staff, led by Dr. Hazem Hussein, director of quarantine at the Cairo airport.



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[UN official: COVID-19 cases likely far higher than Syria says](#)

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UNITED NATIONS: Reports of Syrian health care facilities filling up and increasing death notices and burials appear to indicate that actual coronavirus cases in the war-torn country “far exceed official figures” confirmed by the government, a senior UN humanitarian official said Thursday. Syria has so far reported more than 2,500 cases of COVID-19, the illness caused by the virus, including 100 deaths.

However, UN Assistant Secretary-General for humanitarian affairs Ramesh Rajasingham told the UN Security Council that “rising patient numbers are adding pressure to the fragile health system” in Syria, now in its 10th year of war.

Many people “are reluctant to seek care at medical facilities, leading to more severe complications when they do arrive,” he said, adding that “health workers still lack sufficient personal protective equipment and associated supplies.”

Of the virus cases confirmed by the Syrian Ministry of Health, Rajasingham said, “the majority cannot be traced to a known source.” He said several health facilities briefly suspended operations this month because of capacity issues and staff becoming infected by the coronavirus.

In the Al Hol camp in northeast Syria, where 65,000 mainly women and children connected to Daesh fighters are detained, Rajasingham said “12 health facilities had to suspend operations this month due to staff becoming infected, having to self-isolate, or due to lack of personal protective equipment.”

“Both field hospitals at the camp have since resumed operations,” he said. Germany and Belgium, who are in charge of Syrian humanitarian issues in the Security Council, said in a joint statement that “the spread of COVID-19 across the country is increasing exponentially.”

“Testing capacities remain very low, so most cases may go unnoticed,” they said. “Numbers we hear may only represent the tip of the iceberg.”

They also warned that “the destruction of health facilities and the shortage of health workers dramatically imperil any response.”

Germany and Belgium urged greater humanitarian access, sharply criticizing demands by Syrian ally Russia that led to the closing of the Al Yaroubiya crossing from Iraq to northeast Syria in January and last month’s closing of the Bab Al-Salam crossing point from Turkey to northwest Syria.

“What is needed is distribution to all people and health care facilities – and not the regime deciding who is ‘worthy of receiving aid’ and who is not,” they said. “The burden of responsibility lies on those countries that have systematically limited humanitarian access” to Syria.

US political coordinator Rodney Hunter expressed concern at reports of “a massive coronavirus outbreak in the Damascus region and elsewhere in regime-controlled areas.”

He called on Syrian authorities to grant access to the UN and international organizations to collect statistics and determine the scale of the pandemic in the country, saying so far there has been “no transparency” by the government.

“The coronavirus is absolutely exacerbating the Syrian humanitarian crisis,” he said.

Hunter said the United States is “deeply saddened” by reports from the UN children’s agency UNICEF earlier this month that eight children under the age of five died in the Al Hol camp in less than a week.

“We understand that four of those deaths were caused by malnutrition-related complications,” he said.

“These deaths were completely preventable if the thousands of camp inhabitants still received the life-saving combination” of deliveries from Damascus across conflict lines and from Iraq through the Al Yaroubiya crossing, Hunter said.

Russia’s UN Ambassador Vassily Nebenzia expressed confidence that once logistics were “adjusted,” the UN would be able to increase supplies through the one remaining border crossing from Turkey at Bab Al-Hawa.

He pointed to a recent article in the British medical journal, “The Lancet,”

which said that the “Syrian health system, already fractured by years of conflict, is being further destroyed by sanctions.”

Entitled “EU guidance impedes humanitarian action to prevent COVID-19 in Syria,” it says: “Widespread cooperation to ensure efficient delivery of medicines and equipment to combat COVID-19 in Syria is lacking.”

Nebenzia also pointed to an Aug. 25 statement by three key foreign powers in the Syrian conflict – Iran and Russia, which support Syrian President Bashar Assad, and Turkey, which backs the opposition – on the sidelines of a meeting in Geneva of government and opposition figures on drafting a new constitution for the country.

Those three countries rejected all unilateral sanctions, Nebenzia said. He denounced the “hypocrisy” and “double standards” of Security Council members that continue to support sanctions against Syria.



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UN Syria talks resume after virus cases forced suspension
Three with COVID-19, Syria constitution talks ‘on hold’: UN envoy

Aden's new governor returns to city

Author:

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Al-Mukalla: Aden's new governor, Ahmed Lamli, has urged political parties and people in Yemen's port city of Aden to set their differences aside and focus their efforts on helping him to revive state bodies and fix services in the city.

Shortly after arriving in Aden on Thursday, Lamli told reporters that he would work as hard as he could to address the city's thorny issues such as insecurity and crumbling services.

"We came to Aden to work with love and loyalty for our beloved capital, Aden. We have support from the Saudi reconstruction fund and the (Yemeni) government," the governor said.

Under a power-sharing deal, known as the Riyadh Agreement, Yemen's president Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi last month appointed Lamli, who is also the secretary general of pro-independence southern Transitional Council (STC), governor of Aden.

Aden, the second most important city in Yemen and the country's interim capital, has become the scene of several rounds of conflicts between the internationally recognized government and the STC since early 2018. Separatists seized control of Aden, expelled the government and in June declared self-rule in the southern provinces.

Aden was declared a disaster area in June after heavy rainstorms destroyed the city, disrupting water and electricity services. In May, the government declared the city an infested area after coronavirus spread rapidly across the city, claiming the lives of dozens of people. Due to crumbling health services, COVID-19 and other diseases claimed the lives of more than 1,800 people in May, according to official figures.

Voicing their optimism about the arrival of the new governor, residents and Aden-based analysts called upon Lamli to urgently unify military units under his command, bring back electricity and water services and restore state institutions. "The new governor is facing many serious challenges. The biggest one is the state of services, including the long power cuts," Yasser Al-Yafae, a political analyst, told Arab News from Aden.

He said that for the new governor to succeed, he has to build harmony, restore trust between the STC and the internationally recognized government and address the teachers' strike that has paralyzed education in the city for several months. "He will not be able to solve these problems if there is no coordination between him and the government," Al-Yafae said.

In Riyadh, several foreign diplomats held meetings with the STC leaders, focusing on their reasons for suspending their participation in Riyadh

Agreement talks. STC official media said on Thursday that its president, Aidarous Al-Zubaidi, held a virtual meeting the British Ambassador to Yemen Michael Aron and also met in person Dya-Eddine Bamakhrama, the ambassador of Djibouti to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. "They came to listen to our point of view and the reasons that prompted us to suspend our participation in the consultations," Ali Al-Katheri, a senior STC member who attended the meetings, said.

The council would come back to the talks when the government halts military escalation in Abyan, pays salaries and addresses the plunge of the currency, he said.

The Djiboutian ambassador to Saudi Arabia said on Twitter that he met STC leaders to express his president's full support for the Riyadh Agreement and for Saudi Arabia's efforts to bring back peace and stability to Yemen.



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