

Migrant workers stuck in virus-hit Iraq with no wages or way home

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BAGHDAD: For years, Rajib Sheikh wired money to his native Bangladesh from his day job in Iraq. But now, stuck without wages, he's asking his family back home for help.

The 26-year-old patisserie chef has gone three months without wages, and his Iraqi employer just stopped paying for his food stipend, too.

He is one of thousands of foreign migrant workers now stranded in Iraq with no income or way to get back home, watching the economy around them collapse.

"We're used to sending money back to our country, but now I had to ask my cousin to transfer me money," said Sheikh, who arrived in the southern oil-rich Basra province seven years ago.

"We hope we can go back to our jobs because it's not just us who are starving, but our families back home, too," he said.

The world economy has seen a dramatic slowdown due to the spread of COVID-19, but Iraq – OPEC's second-largest crude producer – was also hit hard by a collapse in oil prices.

That has sent the country spiralling into its worst fiscal crisis in years, with the World Bank estimating GDP will shrink by 10 percent this year.

Informal workers, it noted, were at a higher risk of falling into "deep poverty" due to the lockdown measures enforced to halt the spread of the novel coronavirus.

Nafis Abbas, a 32-year-old Pakistani tailor in Baghdad, returned to work last week after nearly four months of total shutdown.

"I want to go back (home) but I don't have any money. If I want to go to Pakistan now, it costs \$700 and I don't have anything – not even 1,000 Iraqi dinars," equivalent to less than a dollar, he told AFP.

Hundreds of thousands of migrant workers, largely from South Asian countries, have flocked to Iraq over the last decade to work in a range of businesses, from oil fields to restaurants.

Among them are 250,000 registered Bangladeshi workers, according to Mohammed Rezaul Kabir of the country's embassy in Baghdad.

"More than 20,000 have lost their jobs," he told AFP, adding that the numbers could be even higher, given how many work informally.

They include 9,000 Bangladeshi laborers at international oil companies and contractors in Basra, once seen as lucky for working in such a lucrative industry.

"Oil prices going down led to a lot of oil fields laying off employees, some of them without even a final paycheck," said Kabir.

Many Bangladeshi oil workers headed north to Baghdad, hoping their embassy could send them home.

"We are making lists and contacting people as soon as we find a place for

them. We are trying our best to transfer them back home but it is expensive and we need a lot of flights to get them there,” said Kabir.

According to an International Labour Organization (ILO) survey, 95 percent of businesses in Iraq have suspended work due to COVID-19.

Four out of 10 said they had to lay off some workers, and many expected the crisis to continue another four months.

Salem Ahmed, an Iraqi restaurateur who employs Bangladeshi, Egyptian and Iraqi workers, said his establishment had been hit hard by the lockdown.

“We estimate our losses at about \$20,000 per month,” he said.

“The government didn’t provide any support to businesses, and we’re still expected to pay taxes by July,” he said.

Even once the lockdown is fully lifted, many business owners surveyed by the ILO predicted they would be unable to bring their operations or sales back to pre-coronavirus levels.

Forty percent feared their businesses will shut either temporarily or permanently.

“The government should explore all options to finance measures that support enterprises, and it should provide emergency support to all workers, mainly those who are working informally,” said Maha Kattaa, ILO’s Iraq country coordinator.

But Mohammed Fadel Lhak, a 49-year-old Bangladeshi worker, wasn’t optimistic. Lhak was in a precarious situation well before the pandemic and the plunge in oil prices, living hand-to-mouth every month from menial jobs at small businesses in Baghdad.

Last year, he always managed to sort something out – but this year feels different.

“Everything is closed now. With the coronavirus, there are no more customers. We just hope for things to get better so we can move on with our lives,” Lhak said.





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[Yemen president urges STC to implement Saudi-led Riyadh Agreement](#)

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Sat, 2020-06-27 18:18

RIYADH: Yemen's president has called on the separatist Southern Transitional Council (STC) to take advantage of Saudi Arabia's efforts to facilitate the

implementation of the Riyadh Agreement.

President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi added that implementing the agreement is in the Yemeni nation's interest, will stop the bloodshed in the country and will unite efforts to fight the Houthis.

Hadi added that the internationally recognized government has fully adhered to a cease-fire in the country's southern governorate of Abyan so that implementation of the agreement could resume.

Commenting on bilateral relations with the Kingdom, the Yemeni president said "We face great and common challenges and lots of coordination, patience and hard work is needed to overcome them."

Tensions have escalated over the last several months since the separatists declared self-rule in Aden and other southern provinces.

This prompted Yemen's government in May to launch a military offensive in Abyan aimed at ousting the separatists from Aden.





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Fri, 2020-06-26 19:52

WASHINGTON: The International Monetary Fund threw a lifeline to Egypt on Friday, saying its executive board approved a new \$5.2 billion, 12-month Stand-By Arrangement that aims to help the country cope with the coronavirus

pandemic and plug budget and balance-of-payments shortfalls.

In a statement, the IMF said the program “would also help the authorities preserve the achievements made over the past four years, support health and social spending to protect vulnerable groups, and advance a set of key structural reforms.”



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[30,000 Muslims pray in Al-Aqsa Mosque while sticking to social distancing](#)

Fri, 2020-06-26 22:41

AMMAN, Jordan: More than 30,000 Muslims attended Friday prayers at Al-Aqsa Mosque while respecting stricter health conditions imposed by the Jerusalem

Waqf Department.

Sheikh Azzam Khatib, director general of the Jordanian Waqf Department in Jerusalem, said that the stricter conditions were brought in because of the uptick in the number of confirmed coronavirus cases in Jerusalem and in other Palestinian towns.

"We issued numerous statements, videos and other announcements telling worshippers that they must bring their own prayer mat and mask and that we will implement a strict physical separation," he told Arab News.

Khatib said that the Health Ministry's announcement of 72 coronavirus cases in the Jerusalem area was very disturbing. "We were worried seeing the numbers of those contracting the virus while many events, including weddings and other public gatherings, were being held without any adherence to basic anti-COVID-19 health requirements."

He added that the Jerusalem Waqf did not want to be held responsible for the spread of the deadly disease.

"We take our responsibilities seriously and we don't want to be blamed for facilitating the spread of the virus. We also don't want to give an excuse to the Israelis to prevent worshippers from accessing the mosque again."

Khalil Assali, a member of the Jerusalem Waqf Council, said that the waqf director and staff had no choice but to strictly follow the Health Ministry's requirements.

"We noticed an increase in visits to pray in Al-Aqsa from Palestinian citizens of Israel and we have been worried about the potential of the spread of the virus, especially during the entry and exit of worshippers when they crowd around the gates and alleys," he told Arab News.

Waqf staff as well as volunteers were deployed all over the Haram Al-Sharif, which is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, to ensure strict adherence to the waqf department's orders.

Wedding parties have been banned in all governorates across the West Bank, the Palestinian government said last Tuesday, because the number of infections were rising.

"Due to the increase in the number of coronavirus infections during the past 24 hours and in order to avoid the spread of the epidemic ... With regret, the government has decided to ban wedding celebrations in all governorates in order to keep you and your community safe from any harm," it said.

The Palestinian government ended a two-month lockdown on May 25, allowing all sectors to reopen.



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From Jeddah to Jerusalem, the faithful return to their mosques
Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa mosque compound reopens after more than two months

[How coronavirus crisis has changed business in the Middle East](#)

Fri, 2020-06-26 20:00

CAIRO: While countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have responded unevenly to the coronavirus pandemic, a majority imposed aggressive temporary lockdowns on businesses and people's movement.

Containment efforts, paired with a global economic slowdown, supply chain disruptions and a drop in crude oil prices, have had grave implications for regional enterprises.

In anticipation of prolonged pain, some MENA businesses have reacted quickly and creatively to this economic turmoil. Here is a look at some of the innovations that swiftly took hold.

*** Fine dining delivered to your home**

Luxury dining is perhaps the hardest-hit segment of the food and beverage industry. Operators were quick to switch to delivery and takeout.

“High-end fine dining restaurants such as Coya (and) Zuma, amongst others, have pivoted in this way, and it’s inspiring to see restaurants quickly move to a completely new business model,” said Ryan Andrews, marketing director of Eat App, a Bahraini startup providing an electronic system for restaurant reservations.

Chatfood, a platform offering a commission-free direct-to-consumer delivery option for restaurants, witnessed a surge in new clients from the region, said co-founder Ben Mouflard.



(Image: EAT App)

*** The rise of e-commerce**

E-commerce in the region has been growing at a cumulative rate of 25 percent since 2014, and online-only retailers have long captured more than 90 percent of this market.

To mitigate the deleterious effects of the lockdown on luxury retailers relying on in-store sales, Dubai Mall launched Noon.com, enabling them to sell and deliver products through the virtual store.

Dubai Airport Free Zone (DAFZA) is accelerating its efforts to launch Dubai Commercitiy, a 2.1 million sq. feet haven for e-commerce businesses with spaces for offices and logistics.

“Given the traction witnessed by clients (going) online due to the pandemic, we are on track for the scheduled opening by the end of 2020,” said Mohammed Al-Zarooni, DAFZA director-general.

READ MORE: [A UAE-based startup addresses gaps in women’s medical care](#)

*** Mobile banking and e-wallets**

A surge in the use of mobile banking and e-wallets has been observed across the region. Starting in March, Egyptian banks – including National Bank of Egypt, Banque Misr and BLOM Bank – have increased their electronic service capabilities.

National Bank of Oman encouraged users to make contactless payments. Fintech

startups have been capitalizing on this trend with the launch of new services, among them PayBy's mobile payment app in the UAE.

"The future of banking is not digital. The future of banking is customer experience, and digital is a tool enabling customer experience," said Ali Khan, financial services director of PwC Middle East.



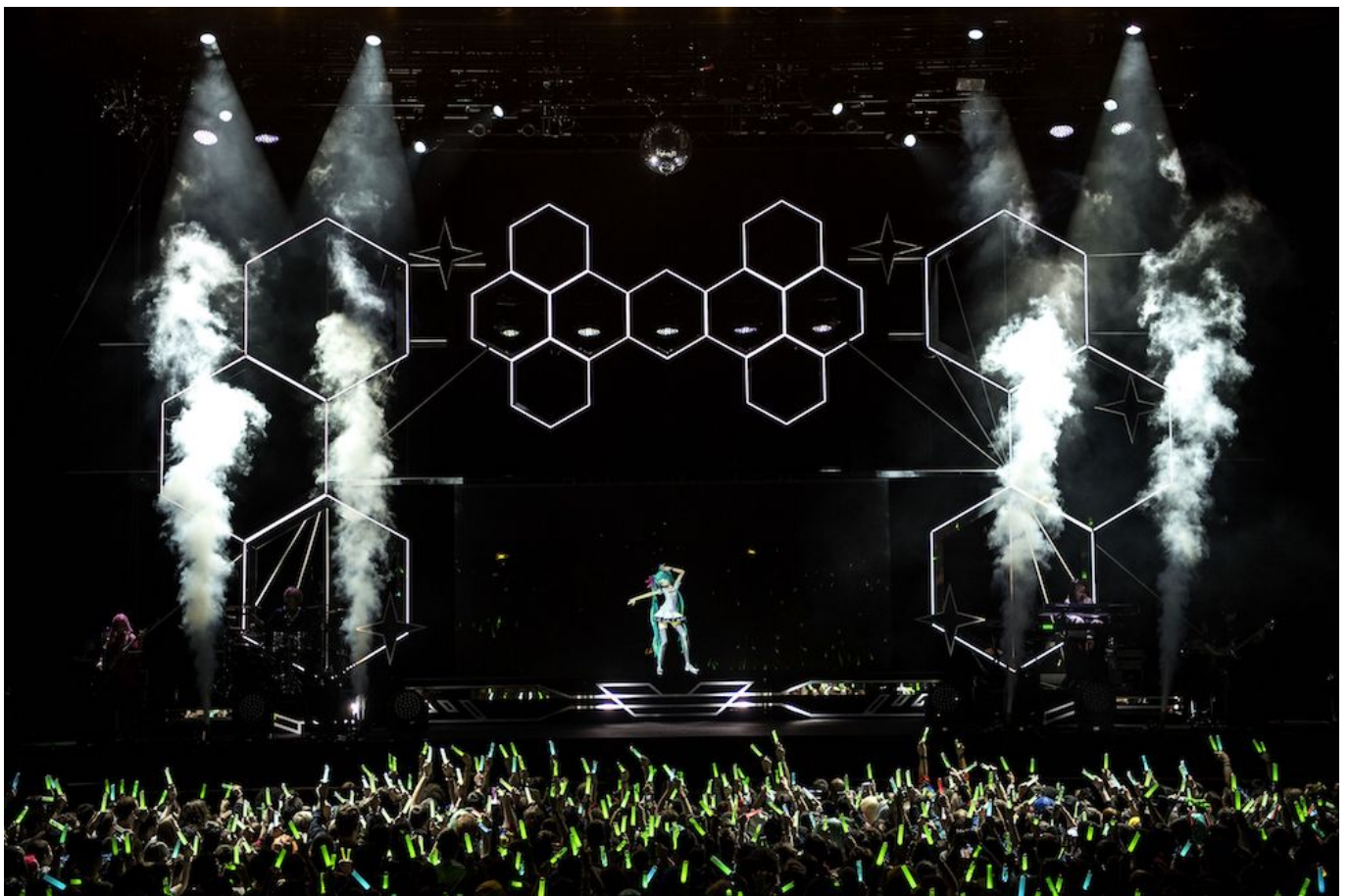
(Photo: AFP)

*** Virtual music concerts**

No-crowd live-streamed music concerts have become hugely popular, with a tipping point reached over the Eid Al-Fitr holiday.

The Egyptian Culture Ministry's YouTube channel started live-streaming music concerts in March. By the end of May, it had added more than 1 million new subscribers.

Supported by major production companies, several popstars from the region, including Egyptian Tamer Hosny and Saudi Mohamed Abdo, performed to an online audience.



(Photo: AFP)

*** The shift toward gift cards**

Entertainment businesses had to innovate to keep the cash flowing as many countries enforced curfews.

With the entertainment market shut down, companies have been promoting gift cards to stay afloat.

Vouchers and gift cards for cinemas and restaurants offer customers future discounts once restrictions are lifted.

"We've helped restaurants market their vouchers" via a dedicated marketplace, said Andrews of Eat App.

*** Telemedicine gets a real-life test**

Based on a recent report by Research and Markets, the digital health care market in Saudi Arabia will grow by 8.8 percent in 2020 to \$16.1 billion.

This growth is fueled by hospitals' rapid adoption of telehealth services to cater to non-urgent medical needs while people's movement is restricted.

As part of its response to COVID-19, Saudi Arabia has required that health insurance companies cover the costs of telehealth consultations.



(Photo: AFP)

*** Virtual guided tours**

Tourism was the first sector impacted by the pandemic, and is expected to be the last to recover.

Egypt's Tourism and Antiquities Ministry launched online virtual 3D tours of ancient tombs and monasteries.

The Contemporary Art Platform in Kuwait and the Akkasah Center for Photography in Abu Dhabi are among the region's art galleries currently offering online tours of their collection.

*** Drive-in cinemas are back**

Drive-in cinemas are coming back to help film lovers in the region get their entertainment fix without breaking social distancing rules.

Dubai welcomed its latest drive-in cinema in May on the rooftop of Mall of the Emirates, with a capacity of 75 cars.

It was followed by one at Dubai Mall, and Cairo's Mall of Arabia has also launched its own version.



(Photo: Courtesy of VOX Cinemas)

This report is being published by Arab News as a partner of the Middle East Exchange, which was launched by the Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Global Initiatives to reflect the vision of the UAE prime minister and ruler of

Dubai to explore the possibility of changing the status of the Arab region.



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