

Egyptian high-school pupils, masked and gloved, head into exams

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CAIRO: Hundreds of thousands of Egyptian high-school pupils armed with masks, gloves and hand sanitizers started their final exams on Sunday, despite objections from some parents worried about spreading the coronavirus.

The health ministry was laying on 2,500 ambulances and providing a doctor for each school. Any student with a high temperature is meant to have their exam postponed or sit it in isolation.

The students had their temperatures taken in the morning, before being seated at desks spaced apart from one another.

Nearly 670,000 pupils from state and private schools, and 128,000 from religious schools, were due to sit the exams. They come at a time when Egypt has seen an acceleration of coronavirus cases, with confirmed infections surging to 53,758, including 2,106 deaths.

Authorities have been gradually easing restrictions on movement, though schools and universities have remained shut since March.

The head of Egypt's doctors' syndicate had called for the exams to be postponed, private newspaper Al-Youm Al-Sabaa reported, and some parents expressed concern about their children's safety.

"Honestly I was worried, and am still worried, because someone in the class might have something (be infected) without having informed the administration on the way in," said Ayman Mahmoud, whose two sons were taking exams in Cairo.

Authorities said they had taken all necessary precautions and the education ministry offered students an option to postpone to the next academic year without any penalty.

End-of-year exams were canceled for younger pupils, who submitted online research papers instead.

As in other countries, many coronavirus cases in Egypt are believed to go unreported. The higher education minister cited a study on June 1 estimating that the actual number of cases could be up to five times higher than the reported figure.





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[Long-dreaded virus increase hits Iraq as new cases soar](#)

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By SAMYA KULLAB and QASSIM ABDUL-ZAHRA | AP

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Sun, 2020-06-21 15:19

BAGHDAD: In Baghdad's vast exhibition grounds, masked workers lugged hospital beds into rows for makeshift coronavirus wards, as doctors and officials sounded the alarm Sunday over a surge in virus cases in the capital. The long-dreaded scenario is gripping the country amid a severe economic

crisis brought on by plummeting oil prices. But with a widening budget deficit, doctors are running low on medical equipment, including key protective gear. A cap on new hires is also expected to strain the already over-stretched system.

As hospitals overflowed with patients, the Iraqi government announced temporary field hospitals will open throughout Baghdad, where infections are highest, to cope with the exponentially rising number of virus patients. Iraq's health system was already battered by years of conflict as well as poor infrastructure and lack of funds.

Work to erect the field hospital in the fair grounds began Saturday, and it will eventually provide beds for 400 men and 100 women. When the supply of hospital cots ran out, workers brought in metal-framed single beds.

"God willing, there will be future plans to increase the number of beds and field hospitals," said Mouhamed Bander, an engineer with the Al-Aqiq institution for charity. His organization set up the wards in tandem with the ministries of health and trade.

Virus cases began rising after the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, when families and friends typically get together to break the daylong fast. In less than a month, infections spiked seven-fold to over 29,000 as of Saturday, up from less than 4,000 at the end of May. Deaths also spiked, with over 1,013 killed among the confirmed cases, according to Health Ministry figures.

Among the recent dead was beloved Iraqi soccer star Ahmed Radhi, 56, who died Sunday due to virus complications.

The troubling increase in cases was due to more testing, but also a lack of public adherence to government measures, said Health Ministry spokesman Saif Al-Badr. Testing increased from nearly 4,000 a day last month to over 13,000 in recent days. By next week, he said 20,000 samples will be examined daily. Iraq took drastic measures to stem the virus's spread, including closing schools, restaurants, public gatherings and international borders.

Despite the additional field hospitals in place, doctors on the front lines fear these measures won't be enough to absorb the rising number of infections.

Doctors said the Health Ministry relies heavily on rapid blood tests to identify the first signs of infection. If these are positive, swabs are taken to confirm whether it's coronavirus using specialized testing kits. But blood tests are known to produce false positives.

"Its overcrowding hospitals," said a doctor in Baghdad. "It's chaos."

The Iraqi health care workers and health officials all spoke on condition of anonymity because of recent measures by the ministry prohibiting them from talking to reporters.

The manager of a hospital in the southern city of Karbala, which reached capacity this week, ordered staff not to conduct tests if symptoms weren't present because "there are no more beds to admit people," a doctor there said. Still, many with no apparent symptoms do have the virus.

All of the health workers interviewed said they'd purchased their own protective equipment because hospital supplies were running low.

"We are in a fog, we don't know what is going on," said the doctor in Karbala, who said they'd asked their hospital for gloves, masks and protective suits, but were told these had run out.

Doctors in Basra and Baghdad cited similar issues.

“The numbers concern us,” said a doctor in a major Baghdad hospital dealing with virus patients. “And we are already overstretched.”

A senior official said the Health Ministry is in dire need of funds. But a budget hasn’t been approved by the government, which is grappling with severe shortfalls in the wake of falling oil prices. Iraq depends on crude exports to fund nearly 90% of state revenue. Allocations to the ministry are made on a month-to-month basis.

“We need a budget twice the size of the previous budget,” said the official. But officials from the prime minister’s office said funds allocated to the Health Ministry also weren’t being spent efficiently.

“The problem is logistics management, the network is weak,” the official said, speaking on condition of anonymity in line with regulations. The official said multiple layers of central purchasing committees within the Health Ministry and in directorates across provinces are responsible for making purchases, instead of allowing hospitals to source materials directly. The ministry is also unable to make new hires, which are essential to cope with the rising number of cases. Recent graduates have been asked to volunteer their services until a state budget is approved.

The move has sparked young doctors to lash out on social media.

“I graduated in 2019 and the Iraqi government has prevented me and more than 2,200 newly graduated Iraqi doctors from practicing medicine,” said Dua’a Al-Jarjees.

Meanwhile, case numbers continue to rise.



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Saudi Arabia records 37 new deaths as life returns to normal under coronavirus

Up in smoke: Coronavirus pandemic no match for Lebanon's hookah lovers

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Sat, 2020-06-20 21:26

BEIRUT: Lebanon's hookah fans are returning to bars and restaurants amid warnings that the smoky pastime carries even greater health risks because of the coronavirus.

A few days ago Tourism Minister Ramzi Msharrafieh allowed restaurants and coffee shops to serve hookah, although some cafes had started offering it weeks earlier to attract customers.

"Hookah alone is totally damaging to the health, and its damage is much higher now with the spread of the new coronavirus," chest and emergency specialist Dr. Wael Jaroush told Arab News. He was irritated by restaurant owners who claimed they were protecting their customers' health by throwing away leftovers but at the same time also offered them hookah. "As if smoking hookah alone does not pose a threat to people's health," Jaroush added. "The latest statistics in Lebanon have shown that 33 percent of girls between the ages of 16 and 18, and 42 percent of young boys of the same age range smoke hookah and this is a real disaster."

Tony Ramy, who is president of the Syndicate of Owners of Restaurants, Cafés, Night-Clubs & Pastries, said that a quarter of people went to restaurants and cafes to smoke hookah.

"Nothing can save restaurants and cafes from their financial crisis, but hookah will restore a certain atmosphere to restaurants that will procure added value for Lebanese cuisine," he told Arab News, referring to the months of economic turmoil and hardships the country has endured.

He said there were 2,500 cafes in Lebanon and that allowing them to serve hookah again might boost their business.

Msharrafieh, who is himself a doctor, stipulated that hookah must be served outdoors and warned people about the health risks of smoking and the damage it had on the respiratory system.

There are also conditions for pandemic-friendly hookah practices: Sterilizing the hookah, not using it twice during the day, checking the temperature of each employee serving the hookah on a regular basis, changing the water inside the hookah bottle before and after each use, using a disposable

smoking tube, and maintaining the appropriate distance between the tables. But the minister's decision angered universities, unions, and societies. Dr. Charaf Abou Charaf, president of the Lebanese Order of Physicians, criticized Msharrafieh and insisted on implementing a law that forbids smoking in public places in Lebanon, whether outdoors or indoors, saying it had been neglected after it being implemented for a short period.

"Smoking, of all kinds, increases the risk of contracting the new coronavirus, especially when smoking hookah as it entails repeated touching of the face with one's hands, by partaking one hookah by many smokers, and by neglecting social distancing, which increases the chances of transmitting the disease," he told Arab News.

Hookah extended the lifetime of microorganisms in it no matter how much it was cleaned and sterilized, he added, and smoking one hookah was equivalent to smoking 40 cigarettes.

"Smoking increases the risk of complications when a smoker contracts the new coronavirus, (they) are higher than the case of a non-smoker," he said.

"Smokers infected with the disease are three times higher than the number of non-smokers. Smokers have higher risks of death or needing breathing apparatus than non-smokers. And there are 40 percent of recorded infection cases in Lebanon who are smokers."

He said that smoking cost the state \$53 million a year and called on the government not to waste what had been accomplished in the fight against the coronavirus. Smoking would, he said, get Lebanon "back to square one" for the sake of "weak economic reasons, and for the benefit of a few at the expense of the Lebanese majority."

He also urged the government to take advantage of the current situation and to rid Lebanon "once and for all of the hookah pandemic."

It was no less dangerous than the coronavirus and the country's health system was going through a perilous stage, he warned. "Our hospitals are suffering from severe shortages, and it is not acceptable to allow a resurgence of the health problem."

Concerns about the reemergence of hookah come as the country returns to normality, and there are signs that people are ignoring preventive measures. Curfews have ended, traffic jams are at pre-lockdown level and people can be seen crowding in front of shops, banks, cafes, nurseries, and electronic game stores, which have all opened to receive customers even though the Ministry of Interior has not sanctioned this.

People are also going without face coverings, unless being instructed to wear them by private security staff at malls and businesses.

Lebanon's confirmed number of coronavirus cases has exceeded 1,500, and the first case was recorded on Feb. 21.



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Has coronavirus killed off shisha cafes forever? TWITTER POLL: Should the shisha ban stay after COVID-19 lockdown ends?

[Egypt is committed to a diplomatic solution to Ethiopia's dam crisis: El-Sisi](#)

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CAIRO: Egypt is committed to using diplomacy to resolve a crisis with

Ethiopia over its construction of a giant hydroelectric dam on the Blue Nile, President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi said on Saturday, addressing stalled talks on the issue.

The talks were halted once again on Wednesday, this time only about a fortnight before the expected start-up of the \$4 billion Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, which is being built near Ethiopia's border with Sudan and is the centerpiece in its bid to become Africa's biggest power exporter. Cairo said on Friday it had called on the United Nations Security Council to intervene to restart the talks.

"When we moved to the Security Council... that was (because) we are always keen to take the diplomatic and political path until its end," El-Sisi said in a speech at an air force base.

"We need to move strongly toward concluding the negotiations and reach an agreement... and solutions that achieve the interest of all," he said.

Egypt, which is almost entirely dependent on the Nile for its fresh water supplies, is anxious to secure a legally binding deal that would guarantee minimum flows and a mechanism for resolving disputes before the dam starts operating.

The latest talks, which had started on June 9 over video conference, followed a previous round of negotiations in Washington, which ended without agreement in February.

On Saturday, El-Sisi recalled that in a speech he gave to the Ethiopian parliament five years ago he said that while Egypt respects Ethiopians' need for development they also should respect its needs for "life."



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Nile dam negotiations reach deadlock Sudan wants PMs to solve Nile dam deadlock

[Stuck in Qatar: Canadians told they could be fired for leaving COVID-19 hot zone](#)

Sat, 2020-06-20 18:25

LONDON: Canadian employees at a college in Qatar have been threatened with job losses if they leave the country over the summer, despite scorching heat and sky-high COVID-19 infection rates.

Employees at the College of the North Atlantic (CNA), a Canadian college contracted by Qatar to run a campus in Doha, have said they fear job losses or reprisal from the Qatari government if they leave the country over the summer.

“Living in a country that has, for weeks, had the highest per-capita number of positive COVID-19 cases in the world is extremely stressful, and several CNA-Q (CNA Qatar) employees are anxious to leave for summer,” one employee said.

The college employs 650 staff, the majority of whom are Canadian. Foreign staff usually return home for the summer to avoid the heat, a factor that this year has been compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic.

“People just want to return to Canada for the summer to get away from this pressure cooker for a few weeks and be with family,” another staff member said.

A spokesperson for the college said: “CNA-Q employees who decide to leave Qatar and do not return to work at CNA-Q when required may have their employment agreement terminated.”

The employees who spoke with CBC News all said they were initially discouraged from leaving the country when the pandemic began, but were not threatened with any measures against them.

In addition to the obstacles employees face trying to go home for the summer, they have also been told that they will be forced to return to classrooms when teaching resumes in September. This decision has apparently bewildered many college staff.

One staff member said: “CNA employees have been teaching online from mid-March and it’s working. Many employees can’t understand why they can’t continue to do this from the safety (of) their home country.”

With more than 85,000 COVID-19 infections among a population of just 2.8 million, Qatar has the highest per-capita infection rate in the world.

The country is in the process of reopening public spaces despite recording over 1,000 new infections per day.



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Qatar’s BeIN lays off presenters, reporters amid lack of sport to cover Qatar Airways to lay off pilots, cut wages