

How Middle East's coronavirus crisis threatens the environment too

Mon, 2020-06-15 18:37

DUBAI: The COVID-19 pandemic has set the world back on the slippery slope of plastic overuse, just when it seemed as if plastic reduction was becoming an achievable goal, experts fear.

The priority of hygiene to combat the spread of the virus has led to a sharp increase in the consumption of disposable plastic products – gloves, single-use water bottles, cutlery, packaging and medical supplies – across the world.

In some Gulf cities, many dine-in customers are being served up to three plastic plates, cups and sets of cutlery for a single three-course meal.

“It’s a disaster,” said Tatiana Antonelli Abella, founder and managing director of the UAE-based green social enterprise Goumbook. “The pandemic has undoubtedly impacted every aspect of our lives, from work to school and our daily tasks.

“It is unfortunate that sustainable practices that have taken a lot of work to implement have now been replaced, due to sanitization (requirements), by the use of single-use plastic bottles, cutlery and crockery in restaurants and delivery services.”

Last year, some communities across the UAE banned plastic use in restaurants, while supermarkets planned to charge customers for their plastic bags. Almost overnight, the initiative has taken a back seat.



In this photo taken on May 13, 2020, Gary Stokes, founder of the environmental group Oceans Asia, poses with discarded face masks he found on a beach in the residential area of Discovery Bay on the outlying Lantau island in Hong Kong. (AFP/File Photo)

“It is a contentious matter, as many would argue against any evidence that using reusables, if sanitized correctly, could in any way be dangerous,” Abella told Arab News.

“Dish-washing machines, high temperatures and dish soap have always been 100 percent efficient (as sanitizers) and always will be. And most of the plastic used is also not fully recyclable.

FASTFACT

Disposables

Eco-friendly disposable items are 20-30 percent more expensive

“Unfortunately, if plastic is not properly washed and cleaned, it is considered contaminated and will end up as general waste in landfills.”

Other sustainability experts concur. “If restaurants clean their tableware and cutlery with hot water and detergent after every use, there is no need for single-use items,” said Amruta Kshemkalyani, a UAE-based sustainability adviser and founder of Sustainability Tribe.



Women wearing masks for protection against the coronavirus, sit at a restaurant in the Mall of Dubai on April 28, 2020, after the shopping centre was reopened. (AFP/File Photo)

“Restaurants just need to pay extra attention to their tableware cleaning process. COVID-19 shouldn’t be used as an excuse to create unnecessary waste and harm the environment.”

Peter Avram, director of the Dubai-based Avani Middle East, which produces disposable packaging solutions and compostable plastic alternatives, said there had been a surge in the use of disposables during the current pandemic.

“Regrettably, due to the current economic situation, plastic is being preferred to the eco-friendly options simply because of costs,” he said. “Eco-friendly disposables are 20 to 30 percent more expensive.”

The UAE consumes an average of 450 plastic bottles of water per person per year – or more than four billion bottles annually.

Opinion

This section contains relevant reference points, placed in (Opinion field)

“It hurts to see so many years of hard work from environmental organizations going ‘to waste’,” Abella said. “The relaxation on the [consumption of] single-use plastics, even if temporary, could quite likely have long-term consequences on consumer behavior.”

When Kshemkalyani started a zero-waste lifestyle in 2015, almost no restaurants and cafes in Dubai were aware of the concept of serving food and drinks in reusable containers.

The environmental cause is expected to return to the foreground when the crisis passes.

Peter Avram, Director of Avani Middle East

Since then, the #zerowasteUAE social initiative and Sustainability Tribe have made tireless efforts to bring awareness to the community on waste issues.

“Now, in the name of hygiene and convenience, if the disposable culture gets popular again, it will be a big hurdle in society’s progress towards sustainable habits,” she said, especially when there is no evidence that a switch to single-use items is imperative during COVID-19.



Emiratis wearing masks for protection against the coronavirus, buy coffee at a shop in the Mall of Dubai on April 28, 2020, after the shopping centre was reopened. (AFP/File Photo)

Kshemkalyani questioned whether restaurants are recycling their plastic waste or just dumping it. “We do not want more waste in landfills that will further contaminate and pollute our land, water and air,” she said.

“Restaurants can start using their reusable serving sets and intensify the right cleaning and hygiene procedures. Instead of spending on single-use items, they have an opportunity to keep their manpower and use it wisely for intensified cleaning – this would also help employment.”

Kshemkalyani also recommended that restaurants allow customers to bring their own plates, cutlery and glasses. “Restaurants can also use environmentally friendly disposables, like palm leaf and wood [cutlery], as a temporary measure,” she said.

According to Abella, “It is important to keep the conversation going to use your consumer power to campaign for these changes.”



Garbage litters the shore of Zouk Mikael, north of the Lebanese capital Beirut, on January 22, 2018. (AFP/File Photo)

Although some outlets are seeking to offer alternatives, consumers should also vote with their wallets and ask restaurants to use sustainable alternatives, she said.

She said: “We should try to cook more at home and, if need be, choose restaurants that make an effort to serve their food in eco-friendly packaging.”

She pointed to the trend of people ordering more items than usual during the lockdown, with many of the items delivered in plastic containers, “wrapped in plastic and bagged in more plastic.”

Avram said that sustainability and recycling efforts must continue, pointing to the uptick in home composting procedures that many residents have begun to undertake to dispose of eco-friendly takeaway items.



A man wearing a protective mask, as a precaution against COVID-19 coronavirus disease, walks outside an empty cafe along Tahlia street in the centre of the

capital Riyadh on March 15, 2020. (AFP/File Photo)

“That has been very encouraging,” he said. “It is expected that the environmental cause will return to the foreground when the crisis has passed.”

Shams Hasan, air quality and corporate environmental responsibility expert at Envipro Consulting in the US, told Arab News: “The COVID-19 pandemic has created strange problems. Plastic items that were being phased out are at least temporarily back in use. The ... fear is that during any crisis, society will start looking at an easy way out and apply ‘band-aid’ solutions instead of working on long-term strategies and solutions.”

Kristin Hughes, director of Global Plastic Action Partnership and a member of the executive committee, World Economic Forum, pointed to the challenge facing the world.

“We stand at the junction of two diverging paths,” she said. “One is a stop-gap solution that puts us solidly on track toward a not-so-distant future in which there is more plastic in the ocean than fish. The other is a sustainable model of living and working that will benefit us long into the future – one that will create a healthier, more equitable and more livable future for all.”

[@CalineMalek](#)





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G20 agrees final communique with reference to climate change

[Sudan finds mass grave of conscripts killed during Bashir's rule](#)

Author:

Reuters

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Mon, 2020-06-15 13:32

KHARTOUM: Sudan's public prosecutor on Monday announced the discovery of a mass grave east of Khartoum suspected to contain the remains of students killed in 1998 who tried escaping military service from a training camp. An investigation has been launched, the prosecutor said, adding that some of the suspected killers belonging to the ousted administration of Omar al-Bashir had fled.

A source in the investigators' team told Reuters dozens of bodies had been found at the site east of the capital.

The prosecutor said the conscripts were shot while fleeing the El Eifalun camp fearing they would be sent to southern Sudan where Bashir's Islamist regime was fighting a civil war with rebels.

Poorly trained and equipped conscripts were sent into the bush fighting against the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA).

The students were also angry that they had been denied time to spend with their families during an Islamic holiday, according to the prosecutor.

No more details were immediately available.

Commanders and instructors of conscripts were often members of Bashir's ruling party and allied Islamists which often framed the conflict against the SPLA, from the mainly Christian south, as holy war.

The Sudan People's Liberation Movement, the political wing of the SPLA, won independence for the south in 2011 following a peace deal with Bashir's regime in 2005.





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Sudan airport to stay closed until June 28

Why Lebanon's electricity crisis is so hard to fix

Sun, 2020-06-14 22:31

BEIRUT: It is two in the afternoon and Verdun Street, one of Beirut's upscale neighborhoods, is doubly lit up – by the midday sun and by street lights.

“Look at the street lamps shining brightly in the middle of the day while most areas suffer from power outages,” Fatima Hachem, 29, a local resident, told Arab News.

The incongruity of the scene – street lights kept unnecessarily on during daylight hours – is unmistakable in a country where residents get between three and 12 hours of electricity a day depending on the locality.

Such systemic inefficiencies are all the more glaring at a time when Lebanon is seeking a \$10 billion loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Given its disproportionate contribution to Lebanon's public debt, the urgency of an overhaul of the electricity sector cannot be overstated.

“Electricity reform is one of the key steps to re-equilibrate the economy,” an IMF official, speaking on condition of anonymity, told Arab News.

“We will see it as an emblematic and major improvement.”

The official added that, without reforms, “there would be no loan program.”

As a first step, the IMF has asked Lebanon to audit its national electricity company, known as Electricite du Liban (EDL). Loss estimates should note “not only the changes in price of fuel oil, but also the change in the exchange rate,” it said.

In recent months, the purchasing power of the Lebanese population has eroded, with the currency losing two-thirds of its value, dropping to LBP4,000 from LBP1,515 to the US dollar.

Opinion

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“At the moment, the Lebanese government links increasing tariffs on

electricity to the increase in power generation, while the IMF believes that those two should not be tied. Also, eliminating electricity subsidies is the most significant potential expenditure saving," the IMF official said.

To generate fiscal savings, it is imperative the Lebanese government increases tariffs as soon as possible, they said.

However, this would mean raising electricity charges for most of the population, who are already under economic pressure as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The power sector's total bill comes to almost \$2 billion annually, roughly 4.5 percent of the country's gross domestic product.

Most of the losses can be attributed to a combination of fuel oil subsidies, tariff pricing on the basis of \$20 per barrel since 1994, and theft from the power grid.

The problem is only set to worsen with an increasing population, including refugees (currently 1.5 million) whose numbers have grown through recent arrivals and whose electricity consumption has crossed the 400 MW mark.

Under the circumstances, Lebanon's electricity shortfall is estimated at 1,600 MW.

Among the things the IMF wants to see are the creation of a regulatory authority for the electricity sector and the appointment of new board members for EDL, which after resignations has been left with only three members to oversee it.

INNUMBERS

44 per cent – EDL subsidies' share of Lebanon's entire debt

\$1.5 billion – Yearly state transfers to EDL

\$42 billion – Electricity sector's debt

\$94 billion – Estimated size of Lebanon's public debt

2 – Power shortages' rank as a business hindrance

Lebanon's Energy Ministry, meanwhile, is pushing for an amendment to laws before the implementation of proposed reforms.

Electricity reforms already exist – but only on paper.

The law, 462/2002, permits the setting up of a regulatory authority, frees it from political interference, and disallows EDL's monopoly over the electricity sector in terms of production, transportation and distribution of electricity.

The implementation, however, is easier said than done.

Christina Abi Haidar, a legal expert with 15 years' experience in the energy sector, said: "Once we have a regulatory authority, the political authority would cease to exist."

She told Arab News: "We only pass reform-related laws when we need to borrow from the international community, but we rarely implement them."

Last month, Dr. Antoine Habchi, a Lebanese Forces MP, filed a lawsuit against the Energy Ministry for corruption and waste of public money.



Dr. Antoine Habchi, Lebanese Forces MP. (Supplied)

"The electricity sector is a black box marred by corruption," he told Arab News, "It is not in the interest of those planning on financially benefiting from it to implement laws or to fix the situation."

Take Law 181 passed in 2011. It was enacted in support of a proposal by Gebran Bassil, the then energy and water minister, to enable the power sector to hire consultants, appoint a board of directors for EDL and establish a regulatory authority within three months.

The cost to the government was projected to be LBP1.772 trillion (equivalent to \$1.175 billion at the time). The proposal was to be implemented within four years, resulting in most of Lebanon receiving power for up to 24 hours a day.

By the end of the period, the money had been spent, but unsurprisingly, there was no improvement in the electricity supply.

“We have spent the money, appointed consultants and built two new power plants in Zouk and Jiyeh, and over \$350 million was spent on the primary works of rehabilitating the old Zouk and Jiyeh power plants,” said Habchi.

“But to date, we do not have a regulatory authority or a new board of directors for EDL. We also do not have 24/7 electricity supply.”

The new Zouk and Jiyeh power plants are said to lack the fuel treatment systems and separators necessary for the burning of any type of fuel.

After many bureaucratic delays, separators reached Lebanon, only to be held up at the Beirut docks instead of being transported to the site and installed.

Now, Lebanon is planning to have four gas-fired plants, two of which were built in 1996. Use of gas could save up to a quarter of a billion dollars per power plant in imported fuel oil costs, according to experts.

But here, too, problems have arisen.

The Selaata power project is a case in point. Work on the new plant is scheduled to start by the end of 2020, around the time when Lebanon intends to shut down the old Zouk and Jiyeh power plants.

Selaata is linked to a plan involving the installation of Floating Storage Regasification Units, or FSRUs, across the country to serve both new and existing plants operating on gas.



Lebanon plans to install Floating Storage Regasification Units, or FSRUs, across the country to serve both new and existing plants operating on gas.
(AN photo by Leila Hatoum)

The initial idea was to have one FSRU for all of Lebanon, located in the northern, Sunni-majority Beddawi area.

However, the issue has sparked political debate along sectarian lines, resulting in the plan expanding to include three FSRUs, tripling the cost.

The argument in favor of Selaata is that there is a need for such a large power plant and that it will be constructed in an industrial area.

However, a number of ministers within the Cabinet object to the Selaata project on the grounds that it involves costly land appropriation.

They say the project was conceived only to please the Christian constituency of the Free Patriotic Movement party and not on merit.

Other concerns are insufficient feasibility and its environmental impact, in light of the power plant's location close to the sea.

"The whole of Egypt has one FSRU, yet the smart people here in Lebanon want to build three FSRUs and waste public money on a useless power plant and overpriced land appropriation," said Habchi.

Raymond Ghajar, the energy and water minister, declined to comment on the Selaata project among other issues.

Lebanon's power crisis is also linked to the smuggling of fuel oil and fuel products to neighboring Syria, according to experts.

This is not only problematic from the standpoint of electricity generation, says Habchi, but also poses a risk in light of Washington's Caesar Act, which bans aiding the Syrian regime.

Within its borders, too, fuel oil transactions are a cause for concern.

An official document obtained by Arab News suggests that subsidized fuel oil has been finding its way from the EDL to the private sector.

A letter numbered 198 and dated June 4, 2018, sent by Sarkis Hleiss, director general of the petroleum facilities in Tripoli and Zahrani (ports), to Cesar Abi Khalil, Lebanon's then energy minister, asked for permission for the purchase of 6,000 metric tons of fuel oil.

More worrying than the amount is the likelihood that the deal was only the tip of the iceberg.

The letter said: "Due to the shortage of fuel oil in our possession, and in order to supply of the local market, your Excellency is kindly requested to accept the request from EDL to hand us a quantity that is about 6000 metric tons of fuel oil from the first tanker loaded with an ISO 8217 fuel oil reaching the oil facilities in Zahrani, knowing that we are ready to pay for the price of this quantity in cash, after determining its cost by the General Directorate of Petroleum, as always."

The request was approved on June 6, 2018.

It seems that Lebanese taxpayers are paying double to receive electricity: Once, during the importing of fuel oil, and again when buying power from the private sector during blackouts.

Against this backdrop of mismanagement, wastefulness, incompetence and corruption in the power sector, what is the realistic probability of the Lebanese government getting the IMF loan?

Not much, says Nazih Najm, head of the energy parliamentary committee, who doubts that international donors will lend any money to Lebanon.

Najm is not even sure Lebanon needs to go cap in hand to the IMF: "We still have about \$18 billion in foreign reserves at the Central Bank as well as gold reserve."

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[@Leila1H](#)



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[Egyptians take up new hobbies under COVID-19 curfew](#)

Author:

Sun, 2020-06-14 22:14

CAIRO: A number of Egyptians have taken up various hobbies to combat boredom during the curfew introduced to fight the spread of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic in the country.

"I spend hours during the curfew cycling in the empty streets of 6th of

October. The streets in this area are empty without a curfew, so imagine them now! I enjoy the fresh air," 20-year-old Giza resident Rania El-Bahjuri said.

As the pandemic and ensuing restrictions forced many people to change their daily lives, El-Bahjuri began biking more often.

"I cycle as a way to kill the time and as a form of exercise to ensure I don't gain weight," she said.

Wafaa El-Bahrawi, for her part, has used the free time to improve her makeup skills.

"Makeup was hobby of mine, even prior to the pandemic; I have my own business centered around it. I have taken advantage of my free time during the curfew to study makeup, and I apply what I learn on my sisters who live with me," El-Bahrawi, 30, said.

Meanwhile, Ibrahim Abdel-Wahid, 37, has cultivated his cooking skills.

"Cooking has been a hobby of mine for a long time, but due to the nature of my job I did not have enough time to practice it. Now, I have the opportunity to cook meals that I enjoy. It came as a surprise to my wife when she found me making dishes better than her own!" Abdel-Wahid said.

The pandemic and extended curfew, from 8 pm to 4 am, have revived kiting throughout Egypt. As the sun sets and the curfew hours begin, the Egyptian skies fill with colorful kites of various shapes and sizes.

Ahmed Mamdouh, 33, who has worked as a calligrapher for 20 years, found a new source of income due to the renewed interest in kites. He began drawing on kites, decorating an average of 10 kites a day at prices ranging from 30 Egyptian pounds (\$1.85) to 150 pounds per kite depending on size and shape.

"People's requests vary, from sports club logos to names of people and drawings of animals," Mamdouh said.

The kites have become more than just a toy, as certain neighborhoods have begun launching kite-flying competitions.

"It's inexpensive to make a kite. All you need is a stick of strong, dry, woven or bamboo firewood, a roll of sturdy thread and some plastic bags," Mamdouh said.

After coffee shops closed where he lives, Sayed Ali, 18, began looking for ways to break routine. He took advantage of the roof of his house, which is now the only place he can go other than the inside of his house.

"Every day, I go up to the roof and fly my kite. It is decorated with an image of Ahmed Mansi," Ali said, referring to the Egyptian Armed Forces officer who was killed after a terrorist attack in Sinai.

"When the kite flies high, I feel that Mansi's soul is also flying," he said.



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Egypt to resume international flights next month
Egypt confirms highest daily rise of new COVID-19 cases and deaths

[Yemen parties should 'compromise to end the war,' says British envoy](#)

Author:

Sun, 2020-06-14 21:53

AL-MUKALLA: All Yemen parties should offer concessions and come together for peace talks sponsored by the UN Yemen envoy, British Ambassador to Yemen Michael Aron has said in an exclusive interview with Arab News.

They should strive to reach a peace agreement that would end the war in Yemen and the worsening humanitarian disaster there, he said.

“Everyone will have to compromise to end the war and reach an agreement, both of which are in the interests of the people of Yemen,” he said. “My P5 colleagues (permanent members of the Security Council) and I are working hard together to ensure that all parties come with an open mind and willingness to find a solution.”

The British envoy, who was appointed ambassador to Yemen in February 2018, said that his government has opposed the Houthi occupation of the Yemeni capital since day one and supported the legitimate government of Yemen in restoring institutions.

“We opposed the Houthi occupation of Sanaa and its attempt to take over the government. We support the restoration of the legitimate government of Yemen.”

Despite diplomatic efforts by the UN Envoy to Yemen Martin Griffiths to convince warring factions in Yemen to come to the negotiation table, fighting has surged over the past several months, killing hundreds of people and exacerbating the humanitarian crisis.

“Regrettably, the situation remains dire,” Aron said. “We support the special envoy and all of his efforts to bring the parties closer together. We help where we can, talking to the parties, rallying the international community, and as pen-holders on the Security Council.”

On his country’s contributions to alleviating the humanitarian crisis in Yemen, Aron said that the UK had donated £1 billion over the past few years, including £160 million through the latest pledging conference. Politically, he wants to push Yemenis into constructively engaging with the UN peace efforts.

“My job is to support the parties to work together, but also highlight where they are not helping – access restrictions by the Houthis in the north are a key concern for the UK.”

The UK ambassador hailed Saudi Arabia’s large donations to Yemen and its role in facilitating the UN- brokered peace efforts aimed at ending Yemen war.

“Saudi Arabia is the biggest donor and has shown leadership in this not only with money but by hosting the conference. They are committed to a peaceful solution and will continue to provide huge amounts of aid to support the Yemeni people,” he said.

“Saudi Arabia and the Saudi-led coalition have a vital role to play in Yemen. Saudi Arabia is working closely with the UN special envoy in support of his peace efforts, which they fully support.”

The Saudi-led coalition and the internationally recognized government agreed to stop fighting in response to a UN call for a humanitarian truce to fight the coronavirus pandemic. The Houthis have escalated military operations on the ground that hampered efforts to stem the spread of the disease, he said.

“We regret the fact that, despite the Saudi announcement of a unilateral cease-fire, the Houthis have continued to pursue their military campaigns. We hope that the Houthis will recognize that the UN proposals offer the only way out of the current desperate situation,” he said.

The British ambassador advised the government of Yemen (GoY) and the separatist Southern Transitional Council (STC) who are engaging in heavy

clashes in the southern province of Abyan, to put into place the Riyadh Agreement and work with Saudi Arabia to resolve the conflict.

“The focus needs to be on implementing the Riyadh Agreement, and the STC coming to Riyadh is very helpful to that end. But President Hadi also needs to take decisive steps to implement the Riyadh Agreement. The GoY and the STC need to work with Saudi Arabia to resolve their differences,” he said.

“By implementing it the GoY and STC will be in a situation where they are united in a newly formed government where they both feel they have adequate representation. The STC have been demanding a place at the UN talks and the Riyadh Agreement offers them a place at the table as part of the GoY delegation.”

Despite the escalating violence across Yemen and deadly missile and drone attacks by the Iran-backed Houthis on Saudi Arabia, Aron believes that there is still an opportunity for a comprehensive agreement to end the war. “Yes. The alternative does not bear thinking about. Yemen has already been set back a number of years, the coronavirus will not help either. The leaders need to do what is best for the people and get an agreement that allows Yemen to build for all its citizens,” he said.

Aron urged the Houthis to be more transparent about the coronavirus pandemic and allow local and international health experts to work freely inside areas under their control.

“We understand that the situation is far worse; this is from those who want to help and are trying to,” he said. “Let experts in to do their jobs, grant them the necessary access and take their advice. The population has suffered and will suffer further and unnecessarily unless there is cooperation.”

Impending disaster

The ambassador concluded the interview by warning that the Safer tanker, docked off the Yemeni city of Hodeida, would cause an environmental disaster worse than the damage caused by the recent spillage of 20,000 tons of fuel in Russia’s Siberia if the Houthis did not allow experts to resolve the problems there.

“The threat to the environment in the Red Sea is enormous, and will impact on all the countries who share this coastline. We urgently need to allow UN experts to board the craft, assess the condition and take the necessary steps to secure the vessel and prevent the oil from leaking,” he said. “It is vital all parties, particularly the Houthis, cooperate to stabilize the Safer tanker.”



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New coronavirus cases in Yemen