

# Perfect storm of crises leaves Lebanese desperate, hungry and poor

Wed, 2020-04-29 18:57

DUBAI: As the coronavirus pandemic continues to wreak havoc on the wealth and health of nations, one small Levantine country in particular has its work cut out.

A “revolution of the hungry people” is convulsing Lebanon as food prices skyrocket and the value of the pound plummets, trapping 6.8 million people between economic ruin and political chaos.

Almost every day, demonstrators across the country are defying the COVID-19 lockdowns to vent their fury over the worsening situation.



A protester, wearing a face mask with the colours of the Lebanese flag, takes part in an anti-government demonstration in a vehicle convoy in the capital Beirut on April 22, 2020. (AFP)

They are braving bullets to burn tires to block roads in protest against the ruling elite's handling of the crisis.

To all intents, the street protests that kicked off in October 2019 have made a comeback as people look for ways to make their voices heard despite the exigencies of the health emergency.

Some protesters in the capital Beirut have attempted to maintain social distance by holding protests in their vehicles and wearing medical masks.



A Lebanese protester smashes the facade of a bank at Al-Nour square following the funeral of a fellow protester in Lebanon's northern port city of Tripoli, on April 28, 2020. (AFP)

A number of commercial stores and supermarkets on Monday joined Lebanon's long list of shuttered businesses – victims of the relentless erosion of people's purchasing power.

The pound has been on the slide since October in tandem with a financial crisis that has driven up the prices of essential items beyond the reach of the average Lebanese.

Lebanese banks have responded to the challenge by setting an exchange rate that is more than 50 percent weaker than the currency's official pegged rate and locking depositors out of their US-dollar savings.



A number of money exchange shops have been ordered to close for not abiding by the country's Central Bank rules of selling and buying US dollars at 3,200 Lebanese pounds.

The pound (or lira) dropped to record lows on the black market last week, reaching 4,200 to the dollar before currency dealers went on strike.

The dismal outlook has been made worse by the COVID-19 outbreak, the impact



of which is almost impossible to estimate despite the precautionary measures taken by the government.



A Lebanese policeman reacts as his jeep is engulfed in flames during clashes between protesters and Lebanese soldiers in the northern port city of Tripoli on April 28, 2020. (AFP)

“The government’s uncoordinated and inadequate response to the pandemic has further eroded public trust in its ability to help people weather this pandemic and pull Lebanon out of its worst economic crisis in decades,” said Aya Majzoub, Lebanon and Bahrain researcher at Human Rights Watch (HRW).

“Months before the COVID-19 outbreak, the World Bank predicted that the portion of Lebanon’s population living below the poverty line would rise from 30 percent to 50 percent in 2020.”

Majzoub pointed out that the virus crisis and its associated shutdown measures were bound to further increase poverty and economic hardship.

She noted the direct link between the pound’s loss of nearly half its value in April and the inflation rate, which the Lebanese Ministry of Finance estimates will reach 27 percent in 2020.



A Lebanese protester sits in front of riot police in the capital Beirut on April 28, 2020, as anger over a spiralling economic crisis re-energised a months-old anti-government movement in defiance of a coronavirus lockdown. (AFP)

“Social Affairs Minister Ramzi Moucharafieh admitted on April 14 that between 70 to 75 percent of Lebanese citizens now need financial assistance,” Majzoub added.

Earlier this month, HRW had warned that more than half of Lebanon’s residents were at risk of going hungry due to the government’s failure to implement a robust, coordinated plan to provide assistance to families who have lost their livelihoods.

No sooner had authorities slightly eased the COVID-19 lockdown measures than clashes erupted between protesters and security forces in the northern Lebanese city of Tripoli.

As dozens of men smashed the fronts of local banks and set fire to an army vehicle, the security forces responded with live ammunition, rubber bullets and tear gas.



Amid the growing political tensions and economic hardship, many suspect the small number of officially confirmed COVID-19 cases in Lebanon conceals the actual picture.



A young Syrian girl is pictured at a refugee camp in the village of Mhammara in the northern Lebanese Akkar region on March 9, 2019. (AFP/File Photo)

“I don’t know what the future holds. No one knows,” said Dr. Naji Aoun, head of the department of infectious disease at Clemenceau Medical Center in Beirut.

“Seeing what is happening in Europe, Lebanon is a small country, so it may not apply to us. It could be different on our scale. But my thoughts (go out) to the Syrian refugees. Who will take care of them?”

Of Lebanon’s 5.9 million residents, about 1.5 million are Syrian refugees – the highest number per capita ratio in the world.

## **FASTFACT**

### **NUMBERS**

87% Refugees in Lebanon who lack food.

\$5.7bn Money moved out of banks in January and February 2020.

45% Population below poverty line in 2020.

Sources: Lebanon government, World Bank, International Rescue Committee

According to the UN refugee agency UNHCR, the refugees' socio-economic situation is becoming increasingly dire by the day owing to income loss.

Nonprofit organizations are aware of the gravity of the situation but there are limits to what they can do.

"You can't offer medical services (as they won't be) accepted in hospitals, which is an issue," Aoun said.

With no medical insurance or international aid, the humanitarian crisis can only get worse, he added.





Dr Naji Aoun, Infectious Disease Specialist at Clemenceau Medical Center in Beirut. (Supplied)

“This will weigh a lot on the refugees. NGOs don’t know what to do. They don’t have any resources and the government can’t help them either because it is bankrupt. They can’t help their own people.”

Aoun is one of the many health workers who have been devoting their time to treat patients, often free of cost.

“We need more support for nurses and doctors because we are going to get infected or bring the infection home with us. This is what happened in Italy and in China, so we need more support – moral, social, psychological and

financial – from our government and our society.

“Life is important to everyone and we are dedicating ours to help the community,” he added.

Dr. Clara Chamoun, a pulmonary, sleep and critical care medicine specialist at the Clemenceau Medical Center, said the situation across Lebanon was grim because the COVID-19 outbreak had come amid a severe economic crisis.



Workers disinfect the Wavel camp (also known as the Jalil Camp) for Palestinian refugees in Lebanon’s eastern Bekaa Valley, on April 22, 2020. (AFP)

“It is harder to convince people that they need to stick to quarantine rules because they live on a daily basis,” she told Arab News.

“We started from a place where we were already facing a shortage of basics. And now, we have got a huge hit due to a lack in ventilators, face masks and alcohol solutions. And there’s no help.”

Proper hygiene is especially difficult in refugee camps, where overcrowding is common and access to basics, such as clean water, soap and detergents, are not a given.

“Those people aren’t going to be in contact with civilians in Beirut, but they are in contact with each other and if one of them is (infected), it would lead to a rapid spread,” Chamoun said.

Earlier this month, the UNHCR announced it required more than \$30 million to



cover Lebanon's additional health needs due to the pandemic.



A Syrian refugee receives sanitisation and cleaning supplies from a representative of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in the city of Sidon in southern Lebanon, on March 20, 2020. (AFP)

The funds would help expand the Ministry of Public Health's hotline capacity, procure thermometers for detection, hygiene items for refugees and protective equipment for frontline responders.

The plans also include establishing isolation shelters for 5,600 people, expanding hospital-bed capacity by 800 and intensive care units by 100, conducting 1,200 diagnostic tests and arranging intensive care treatment for 180 refugees.

The UNHCR's program requires a further \$55 million to meet the secondary healthcare needs – both related to COVID-19 and non-COVID-19 – of refugees.

Aoun appealed for international solidarity in providing succor to migrants and refugees in Lebanon.

"They may say it's not their problem, but the problem is getting worse. No one will go blaming the international community nor the Lebanese authorities – it's a worldwide problem.

"If countries have medication, they will prioritize it for their people. Europe closed its borders so they prioritized their own population, but we can't do the same with the refugees," he said.

With hunger, poverty, joblessness and a deadly pandemic staring Lebanese in the face, Chamoun said the resilience of the people was the country's only hope.

"We have been through a lot already. But this is truly the biggest challenge," she said.



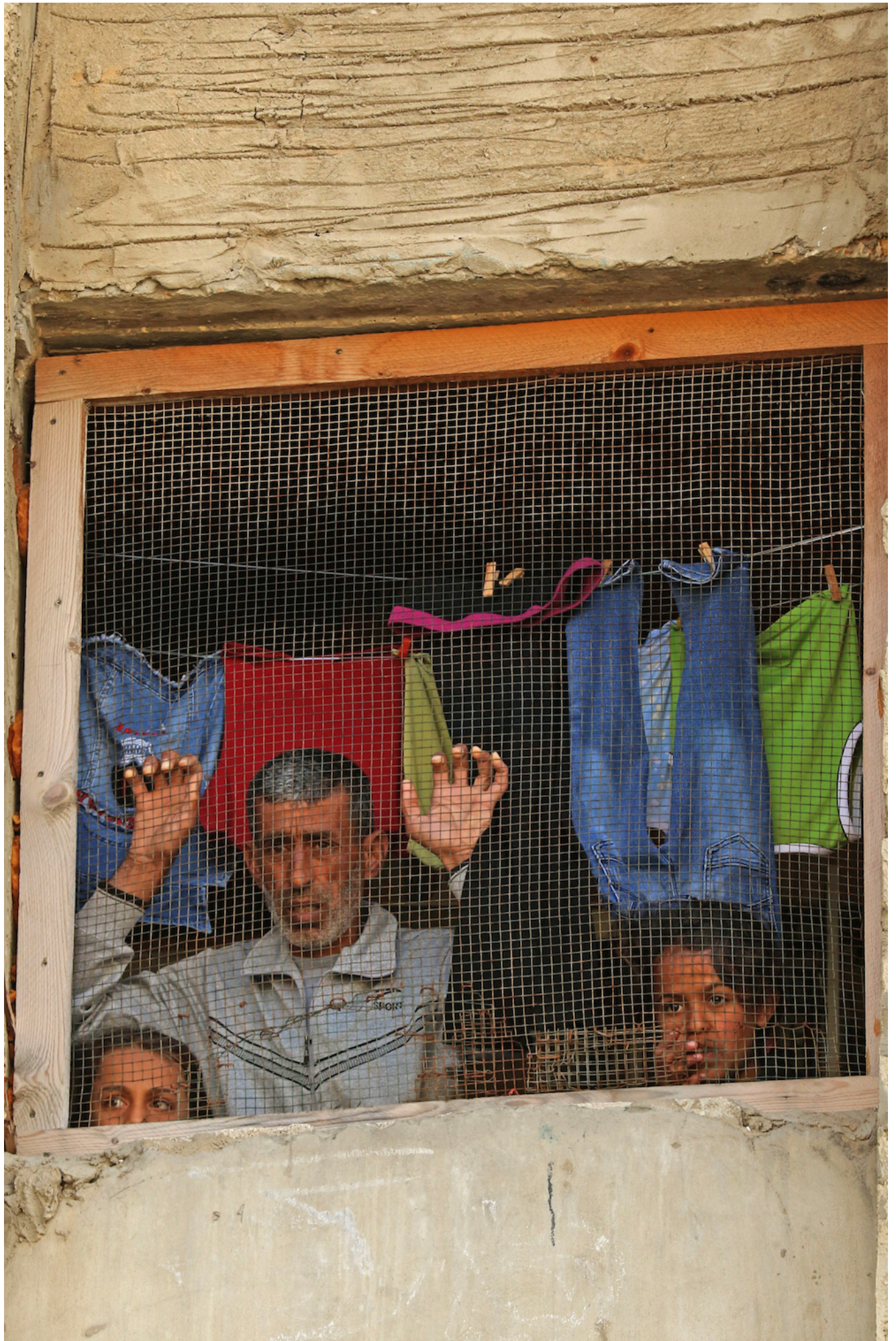




















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## [Pompeo: US will stop Iran buying weapons when UN arms embargo lifted](#)

Wed, 2020-04-29 17:07

LONDON: The United States insisted Wednesday it would not allow Iran buy conventional weapons when a UN arms embargo is lifted later this year.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said the world realizes that Tehran can not be allowed to be sold weapons systems while it continues to wreak havoc in the Middle East.

The embargo is due to expire in October and the US is hoping to find away to get the UN Security Council to agree to extend and strengthen the measure.

“We’re not going to let that happen,” Pompeo said when asked about the embargo expiring.

“Does anybody think that the nation that today is conducting terror campaigns by Lebanese Hezbollah, or Iraqi Shia movements or firing military missiles into the air ought to be permitted to purchase conventional weapons systems in just a few months?”

“I think the world realises that’s a mistake.”

Pompeo said the US would work with the Security Council to extend the prohibition, but if that failed, it would evaluate “every possibility.”

He said the situation was one of the many failings of the 2015 Iran nuclear deal designed to reduce Tehran’s nuclear activity in exchange for an easing of sanctions.

Donald Trump withdrew the US in 2018 from what he described as “the worst deal in history”, which agreed for the embargo to end on Oct. 18. Washington reimposed sanctions and increased America’s military capabilities in the Gulf after Iran was blamed for attacks on shipping and Saudi Arabia.

Pompeo also accused Iran of flying support to Venezuela – another country that the US is targeting with heavy sanctions.

Today, [@SecPompeo](#) spoke on [#Iran](#) and the Maduro regime, [#5G](#) security, and U.S. foreign assistance in the face of the [#COVID19](#) pandemic. [pic.twitter.com/dGpENh5zVx](https://pic.twitter.com/dGpENh5zVx)



– Department of State (@StateDept) [April 29, 2020](#)

He said over the last few days multiple aircraft belonging to Mahan Air had transferred “unknown support” to the regime of Nicolas Maduro.

“This is the same terrorist airline that Iran used to move weapons and fighters around the Middle East,” Pompeo said.

He called for the flights to stop and for other countries not allow Mahan Air to fly through their airspaces.



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Pentagon downplays Iran military satellite as ‘tumbling webcam’Iran space program front for nuclear ambitions: Pompeo

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# Pompeo says US 'concerned' over south Yemen separatist self-rule declaration

Author:

Reuters

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1588164784794020700

Tue, 2020-04-28 23:35

WASHINGTON: US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said on Tuesday Washington was 'concerned' over the Southern Transitional Council (STC), a separatist group, declaring self-rule in Yemen's south, warning such actions threatened efforts to revive talks between the Yemeni government and Houthi rebels.

"Such unilateral actions only exacerbate instability in Yemen," Pompeo said in a statement. "They are especially unhelpful at a time when the country is threatened by COVID-19 and also threaten to complicate the efforts of the UN Special Envoy to revive political negotiations between the government and the Houthi rebels."

The Arab coalition, which includes Saudi Arabia, has announced a unilateral truce prompted by a United Nations plea to focus on the coronavirus pandemic. The Houthis have not accepted it and violence has continued.

Yemen's internationally recognized government warned of "catastrophic consequences" after the STC on Sunday declared emergency rule in southern governorates including Aden, interim seat of the government that was ousted from power in the capital, Sanaa, by the Houthi group in late 2014.

"We call on the STC and the Republic of Yemen government to re-engage in the political process provided under the Riyadh Agreement," Pompeo said.

On Monday, the coalition engaged in Yemen urged the STC to rescind its move, saying it was an "escalatory action" at a time when all parties should focus on confronting the novel coronavirus.





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Saudi cabinet urges southern Yemeni separatists to reverse self-rule decision  
US embassy in Yemen rejects 'unilateral steps' taken by southern separatists

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## [World Bank provides Jordan \\$20 million coronavirus relief package](#)

Author:

Wed, 2020-04-29 10:03

DUBAI: The World Bank has approved a \$20 million project to help Jordan respond to the health impacts of the COVID-19 outbreak, state news agency Petra reported.

The new COVID-19 Emergency Response project will support the Ministry of Health's efforts in preventing, detecting and responding to the threat posed by the pandemic.

This fast-track assistance package falls under the \$6 billion COVID-19 Strategic Preparedness and Response Program approved by the World Bank's executive directors earlier this month to strengthen the responses of developing countries to the pandemic.

"Jordan is affected by a pandemic whose impacts expand beyond the health sector and cause an economic slowdown and weaker growth prospects," Saroj Kumar Jha, World Bank Mashreq Regional Director, said.

The regional director said that supporting Jordan's ability to face the coronavirus health crisis is crucial to prevent a set-back in the significant improvements in health outcomes the has achieved over the past two decades.

"Jordan was one of the first countries in the region, if not the world, to take early and strict measures to contain and mitigate the spread of COVID-19," Jordanian Minister of Planning and International Cooperation Wissam Rabadi said.

Rabadi added that despite the decline in the number of cases in the country, Jordan will require support to maintain efforts to ensure the outbreak is properly contained and avoid a new surge in numbers as the country begins to relax its strict measures.

The project will provide support to enhance case detection, testing, recording and reporting, as well as contact tracing, risk assessment and clinical care management over the next two years.

The plan, which was prepared with WHO, will be updated periodically to identify financial requirements for several outbreak scenarios.





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Brazil passes 5,000 deaths from coronavirus

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## [Egypt tech firm aids virus fight with 3D-printed face shields](#)

Author:

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1588093585298206800

Tue, 2020-04-28 13:05

CAIRO: Many health care workers in Egypt's threadbare hospital system must provide their own protective gear, so when a digital design company started 3-D printing face shields, they gratefully accepted.

Since the novel coronavirus first hit Egypt, medical doctor Yahya Diwer has been working all-night shifts as head of an intensive care unit in a Cairo hospital.

Around 100 COVID-19 cases have since passed through his Sheikh Zayed Al-Nahyan hospital, located in a low-income suburb of the capital, exposing staff to a heightened risk of contagion.

So when Diwer spotted a widely shared social media post by the Cairo-based tech company Giza Systems last month he was among the first to get in touch via Facebook.

The company uses digital printing technology mainly to produce assistive devices for people with disabilities, working in a lab called Project Nitrous.

With the arrival of the virus – which has by now infected over 4,000 people and claimed 300 lives in Egypt, according to government data – the company quickly jumped into action.

It designed a face shield that can be printed in plastic, cut out by laser and simply assembled, and started delivering the devices to thousands of doctors – for free.

“You feel safe wearing it and the design is sleek,” Diwer told AFP. “It’s easier than wearing a set of goggles and can be easily cleaned.”

Mohamed El Hossary, director of Giza Systems’ Education Foundation, said its usual work aims to create “everyday solutions for those with a disability.

“Since we have experience in assistive technology, we went down to hospitals and asked them what they needed, and that’s how we came up with manufacturing a face shield.”

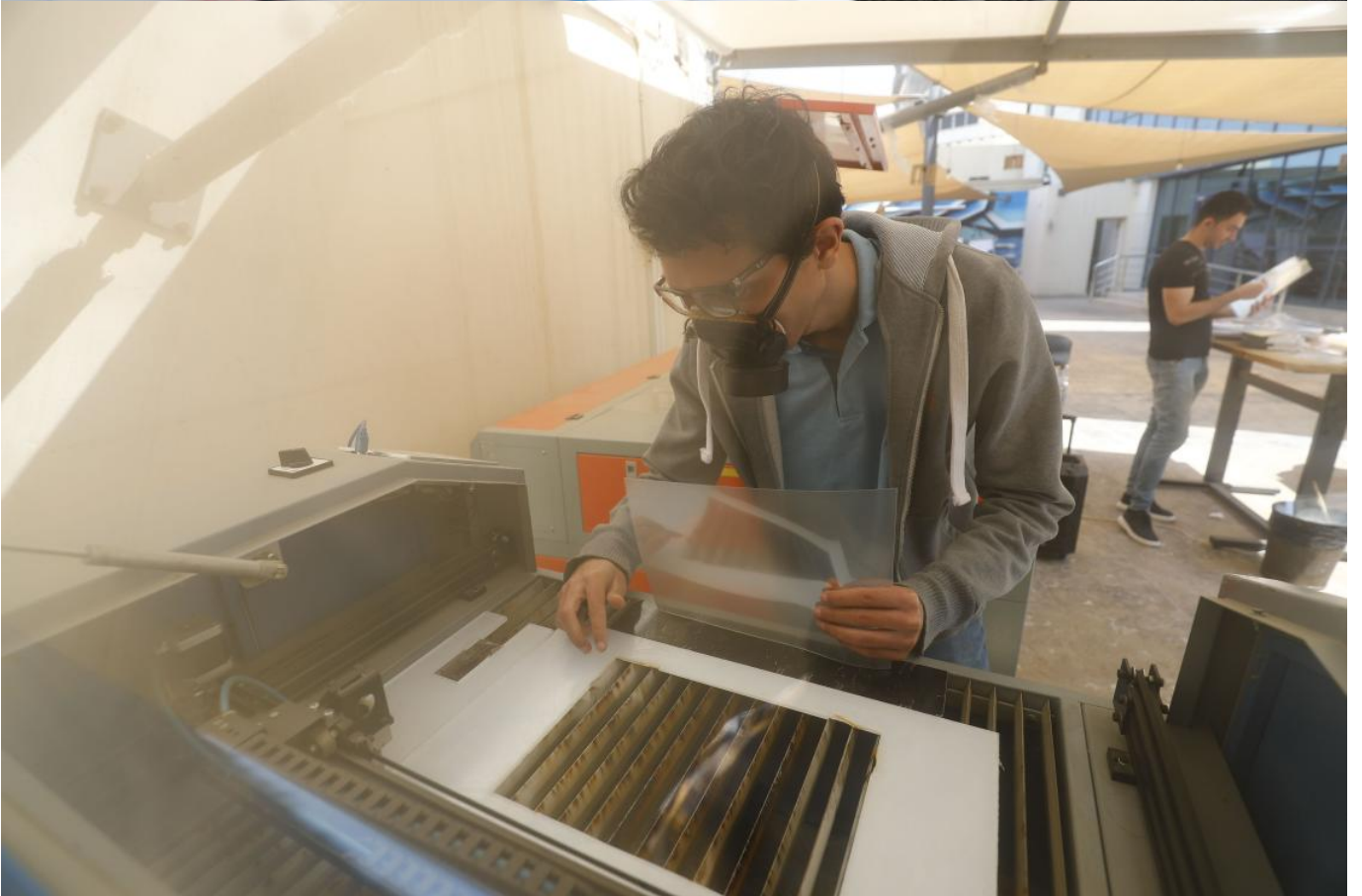
The firm is now distributing around 2,000 face shields a day to medics nationwide and has partnerships with around 25 public and private hospitals. Volunteers such as university student Abdel-Raziq Sabry, 21, help by packing the devices for shipment.

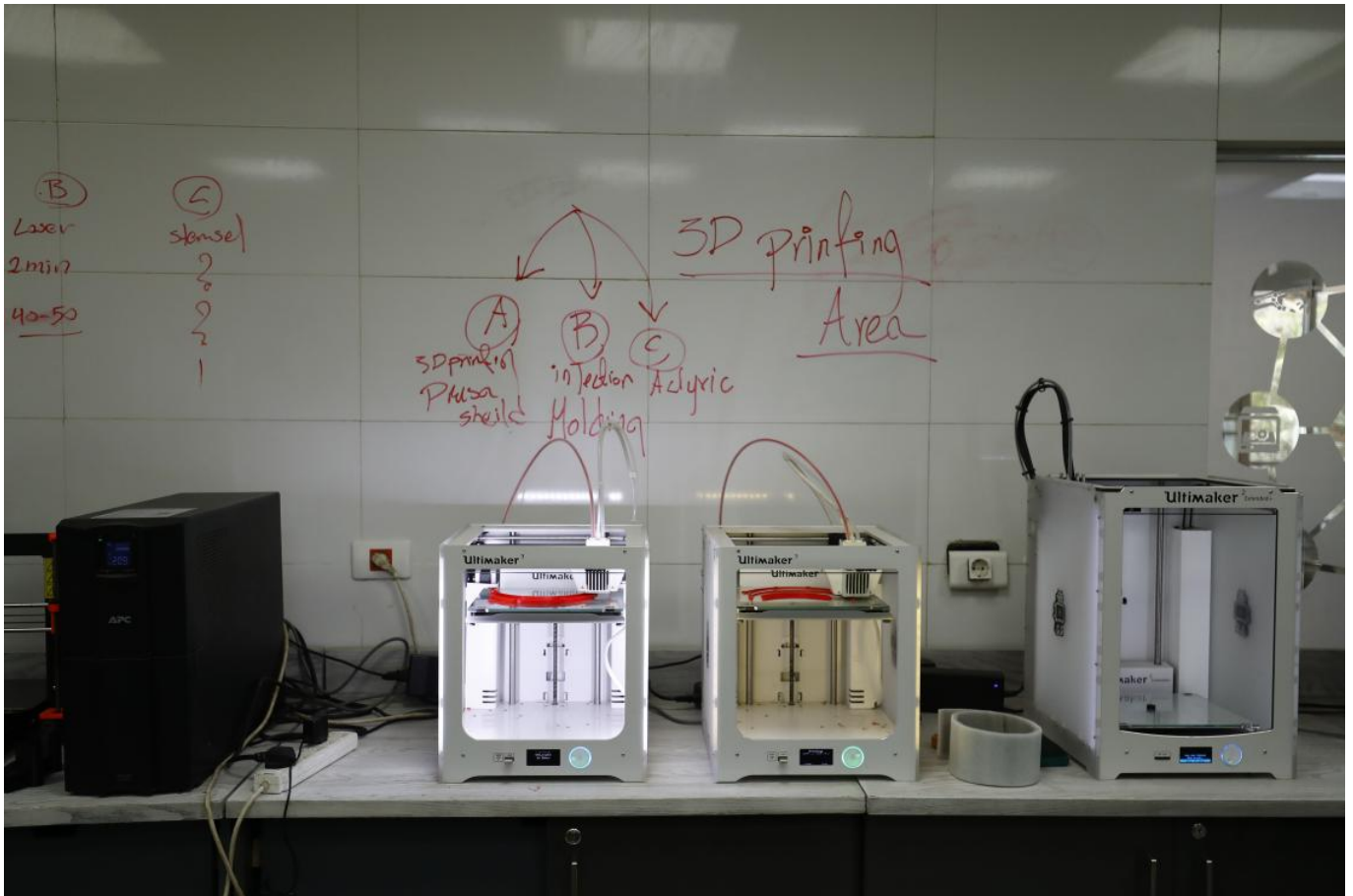
“You don’t want to be sitting at home doing nothing when you can be doing something to help doctors and society as well as the country,” he said.

The frontline efforts of Diwer’s team have been honored. His hospital was chosen by the health ministry as one of the major isolation wards where virus carriers can recover.

In a message he posted on Facebook, the doctor paid tribute to his staff as well as the tech company, saying that “we are so humbled and honored to fight for the people against COVID-19.”







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