

Muslims grapple with Ramadan rituals in coronavirus era

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By MARIAM FAM | AP

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Thu, 2020-04-16 18:03

WINTER PARK, FLORIDA: Seattle resident Maggie Mohamed was looking forward to spending the Islamic holy month of Ramadan in her native Egypt.

Now, with the spread of the new coronavirus, flying is off the table. So is having friends and relatives over for a potluck iftar, the breaking of the fast. Mohamed is older than 65 and says she cannot risk it.

"It's very sad. We were very excited," she said. But, "I don't take it as a punishment. I take it as a wake-up (call)."

Ramadan, which starts later this month, unites Muslims the world over in fasting and worship. This year, it follows a string of religious holidays that have also unified the faithful from different religions in grappling with how to observe familiar rituals and celebrations in a time of unfamiliarity.

Mohamed is contemplating workarounds. She always looks forward to the special Ramadan prayers, known as "taraweeh," at the mosque. She will now pray at home with her daughter. But what about the dua, or supplication? The imam moves her to tears. As he prays for dead loved ones or those suffering in faraway lands in his "miraculous" voice, sobs rise from the faithful and intermingle with chants of "Amen" recited in unison.

Mohamed wonders: Can he make dua over Zoom video conferencing?

"That would help us a lot," she said, even as she noted it wouldn't be the same. At her mosque, female worshippers hug and chat after the prayers as children scurry around and dates and chocolate are passed from hand to hand. During Ramadan, the faithful abstain from food and drink from sunrise to sunset as they strive for self-purification and empathy. It's a time for prayers, introspection and charity. Normally, it's also a time for family, friends and festive feasting.

This year, there are indications the outbreak will cast a pall over many beloved rituals.

Many Muslims have been praying for the coronavirus cloud, which has already disrupted Islamic worship the world over, to lift before Ramadan. Mosque closures and modified calls for prayers urging the devout to pray at home have left many feeling emotional. They are relying on worship at home and online religious classes. This year, some are planning virtual interfaith iftars.

Texas-based imam Omar Suleiman said empty mosques are reason for reflection. "How do we build ourselves to where we are more connected to Him?" asked Suleiman, who has been streaming virtual sermons and nightly reflections to more than 1.4 million Facebook followers.

"Now we have a chance to develop empathy with those that have not had access to their religious spaces due to oppressive circumstances."

Malaysia, Brunei and Singapore have banned popular Ramadan bazaars where hawkers sell food and drinks in congested open-air markets or roadside stalls. In predominantly Muslim Malaysia, vendors are now planning to bring their businesses online through mobile apps or digital platforms provided by local authorities during the fasting month.

Mohamad Fadhil, a trader in Malaysia's southern Johor state, said he was resigned to not being able to do business at the Ramadan bazaar or perform the taraweeh prayers at the mosque. "We just have to be patient and follow orders," he said.

In Iran, which is suffering one of the world's worst outbreaks, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei suggested that mass gatherings may be barred through the holy month. "Remember to heed your prayers and devotions in your lonesomeness," he said.

The Islamic Waqf, which administers the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, Islam's third-holiest site, announced today that the mosque will continue to be closed to worshippers for Ramadan.

It's difficult, Sheikh Azzam Khatteeb, the director general of the Waqf, said before the latest announcement, but "the health of the worshippers comes before anything else."

Zuher Dubie, a 71-year-old mosque preacher in the West Bank city of Nablus, has been observing Ramadan and praying in mosques since he was 10. For the first time since, Dubie said, he wouldn't be able to practice some of the month's rituals.

"There will be no social gatherings, no Ramadan aroma in the markets, no collective prayers ... in mosques," he lamented.

In Egypt, the Ministry of Religious Endowments decided to suspend communal Ramadan activities, including mass charity iftars around mosques. Mosques have already closed for prayers there and the country is under a night-time curfew.

Ramadan is normally lively in the country of more than 100 million – and steeped in tradition.

Ordinarily, worshippers fill mosques and shoppers swarm markets. Loved ones gather over scrumptious iftars. Strangers break bread together in street banquets that feed the needy. Cafes teem with patrons chatting over a cacophony of gurgling water pipes and blaring music. And Ramadan lanterns cast a colorful glow over bustling streets.

In some areas, a "mesaharati," bangs on a drum as he wakes up residents for "suhoor," the pre-dawn meal that will sustain them through another day of fasting.

Souad Selim, an Egyptian, has been wondering what all the changes this year would mean for a cherished Ramadan ritual.

Before, she would slip early to bed as many binge watch television shows produced for Ramadan entertainment. At around 3:00 a.m., she would wake up to have "suhoor" and cook up a storm. Using groceries that she and co-workers had pitched in to buy, she would prepare dozens of meals before she left for work. Before iftar, Selim and other volunteers would go outside to distribute boxes neatly packed with salad, rice, chicken or meatballs.

Now, she likely won't be able to hand out meals on the street but she's determined to send iftars to the homes of those she knows need them.

"It's hard to describe how much goodness and blessings Ramadan brings," she said.





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[Coronavirus](#)

Egypt to ban Ramadan gatherings to counter spread of coronavirus
Muslims grapple with Ramadan rituals in coronavirus era

[Funding shortage means UN programs in Yemen will start closing down: Aid chief](#)

Thu, 2020-04-16 17:55

LONDON: A funding shortage means UN programs in Yemen will start closing down in the next few weeks, the organization's emergency relief coordinator Mark Lowcock said on Thursday.

"Of the UN's 41 major programmes, 31 will start closing down in the next few

weeks if we can't secure additional funds. This means we will have to start eliminating many of the activities that may offer Yemenis' best chance to avoid COVID-19," Lowcock told the UN Security Council.

He added that the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) will have to stop immediate assistance for families displaced by conflict or natural disasters which means that "up to 1 million displaced people would not receive critical supplies."

Nutrition programmes will also be cut, Lowcock added, and this will affect 260,000 severely malnourished children and 2 million other children who are moderately malnourished in the country.

The UN relief coordinator also thanked Saudi Arabia for its pledge last week of \$500 million for the UN-led response in Yemen and \$25 million for COVID-19 activities.

Meanwhile, United Nations Yemen envoy Martin Griffiths said on Thursday he expects the opposing parties in the country to formally adopt "in the immediate future" agreements on a nationwide ceasefire, key economic and humanitarian measures and a resumption of political talks. Griffiths said he has been negotiating with the parties on the texts for the past two weeks. "We expect them to agree on and formally adopt these agreements in the immediate future," he told the UN Security Council.

Griffiths told the UN Security Council he has been negotiating with the parties on the texts of his proposals for the past two weeks. "We expect them to agree on and formally adopt these agreements in the immediate future," he said.

He said the economic and humanitarian measures could include: release of prisoners and detainees, opening Sanaa airport, paying civil servant salaries, opening access roads, and ensuring entry at Hodeidah ports for ships carrying commodities that will help in the fight against COVID-19. "The conversations we had with the two parties, and our consultations with the Saudi-led Coalition among other international actors ... are continuous, detailed and constructive," Griffiths said.

He said "good progress" was being made and the United Nations was redoubling its efforts to bridge outstanding differences "before we convene them at a meeting where ... these agreements will be tabled, confirmed – I hope – and published."

(With Reuters)



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UN thanks Saudi Arabia for Yemen humanitarian aid amid coronavirus
Health of Yemen's only coronavirus case improves

[UAE ranks among top 10 countries in coronavirus treatment efficacy](#)

Thu, 2020-04-16 14:55

DUBAI: The UAE has been ranked as the world's 10th best for the treatment of coronavirus according to the Deep Knowledge Group, placing as the first among Arab nations.

Germany's COVID-19 treatment efficacy received the top score, followed by China, South Korea, Austria, Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, Israel and Japan. The Deep Knowledge Group, headquartered in the UK, is a collection of

commercial and non-profit organizations active in research, investment, entrepreneurship and more in the realms of DeepTech and Frontier Technologies, such as AI, Longevity and Fintech. Meanwhile, Dubai's authorities have transformed the World Trade Center into a 3,030-bed hospital for coronavirus patients. UAE also continues to ramp up testing services, as they launch a home-testing service for people with disabilities and drive-through centers. The country has detected 5,365 people infected with COVID-19, and reported 33 deaths.



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UN praises UAE's support for African countries during coronavirus crisis
UAE COVID-19 cases up by 412 after health ministry tests over 32,000

[Dubai issues new movement permit restrictions](#)

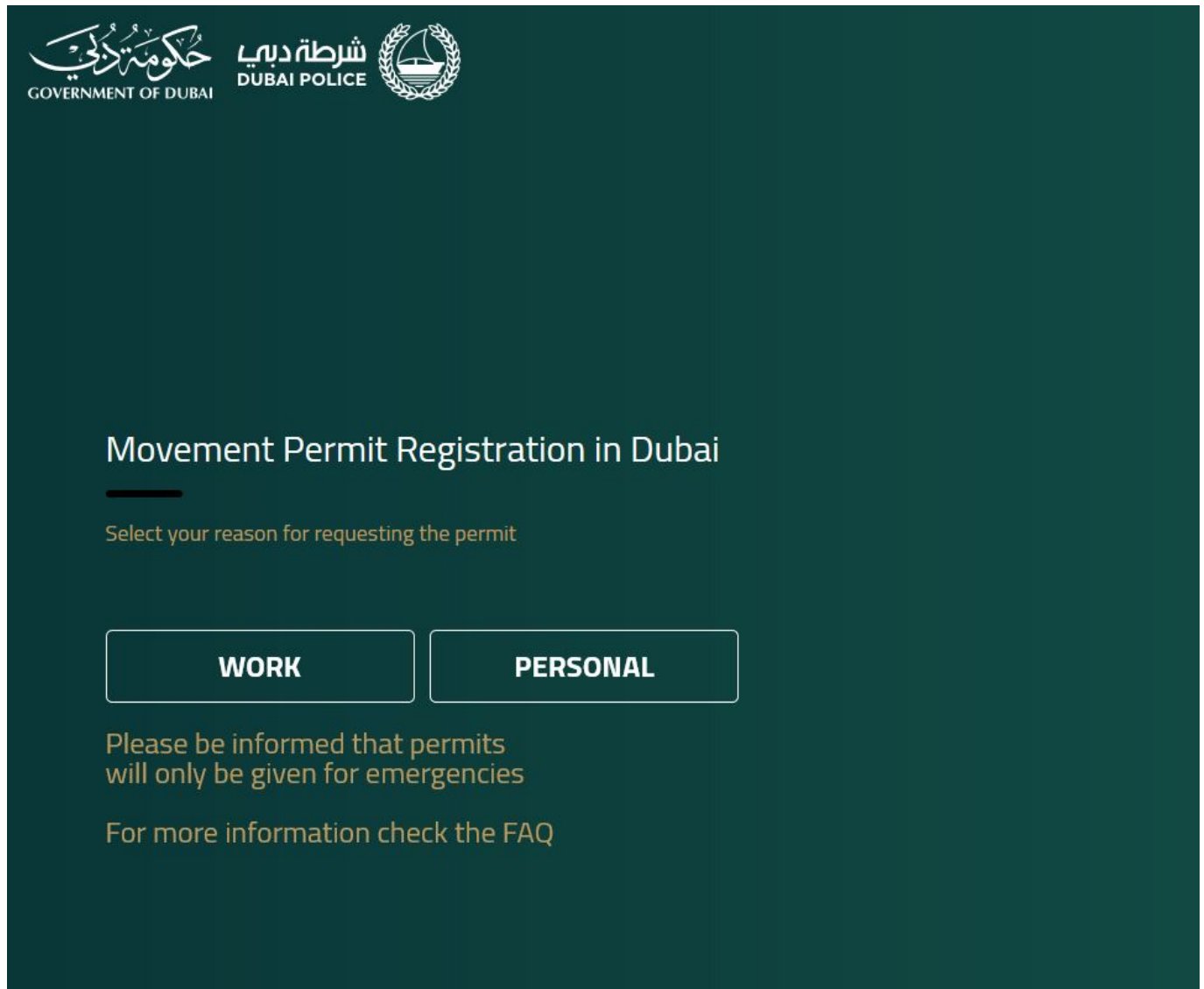
Author:

Thu, 2020-04-16 14:00

DUBAI: New restrictions have been imposed on Dubai's movement permits,

rationing households to one every three days, as the country continues in its efforts to contain the coronavirus spread.

People will only be allowed to leave their homes once every three days to buy essential goods at grocery stores or pharmacies, while withdrawing cash from ATMs will be allowed once every five days, according to the permit application website.



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WORK **PERSONAL**

Please be informed that permits will only be given for emergencies

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Individuals with emergency cases will be allowed to leave their homes twice a day, the statement added.

The movement permit system was introduced in March, while imposing fines on violators of the system was later announced.

The total number of infected people with coronavirus in the UAE has reached 5,365, with 33 deaths. The country has also recorded 1,034 recoveries.



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Iran's coronavirus death toll rises by 92 to 4,869: health official
Dubai Heights Academy shares tips for home learning

[Lebanon suspends repatriation flights for virus-stranded nationals until April 27](#)

Author:

Wed, 2020-04-15 22:50

BEIRUT: Lebanon has suspended repatriation flights until April 27 for thousands of nationals trapped abroad by the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak.

The Lebanese Cabinet committee tasked with bringing home stranded citizens said the move was designed "to maintain the capacity of hospitals and hotels designated for isolation and to re-evaluate the measures taken."

Meanwhile, Alwaleed Bin Talal Humanitarian Foundation announced that it would bear the costs of flying home students from Italy, France and Ukraine, while Middle East Airlines (MEA), Lebanon's national flag carrier, has offered a 50 percent discount for students and allowed their family members to pay for flight tickets in Lebanese pounds.

The number of recorded COVID-19 cases in Lebanon on Wednesday rose by 17 – including five nationals returning from abroad – to 658.

There were 34 people newly infected by the virus among the 2,317 citizens returned to Lebanon between April 6 and 13 on 20 commercial flights, and 356 returnees on 53 private jets, that landed at Rafic Hariri International Airport on the permission of Lebanese authorities.

The COVID-19 cases had flown in from the UK, France, Spain, Liberia, Turkey, Qatar, and the UAE. The remainder of the returnees were still undergoing two weeks of home isolation to ensure that they had not contracted the deadly virus.

Thousands of people have registered with Lebanese embassies around the world to return home because of the COVID-19 outbreak, and they have been put on waiting lists drawn up by the Lebanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Some have been unable to cover their expenses due to the interruption of their business and difficulties in getting bank transfers in dollars from Lebanon, a problem which has particularly affected students.

Abdel Salam Marini, Alwaleed Bin Talal Humanitarian Foundation's manager, said: "We are coordinating with the Lebanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and we have informed them that we will cover the cost of a full plane of students from France and another from Italy and there are hundreds of these (students) still stuck in these two countries."

Two MEA flights, funded by the foundation, brought back 110 students last Saturday from Rome and 55 from Paris.

Marini added: "We are ready to bear the expenses of the return of more students, especially those stranded in northern Italy, and we propose to send a plane to Milan so that students can reach the airport without being exposed to infection during their movements. We will also bear the expenses of about 600 students who are still in France."

The cost of returning Lebanese students from Ukraine would also be footed by the foundation, he said. "About 400 students are studying in the semi-free universities of this country (Ukraine) and their families cannot afford to bring them back. We are ready and communicating with (Lebanese) Foreign Minister Nassif Hitti who asked us to sponsor these students and we agreed."

Alwaleed Bin Talal Humanitarian Foundation was established in 2003 and its initiatives and programs in Lebanon focus on addressing the social and medical needs of the country.



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Lebanon considers new repatriation flights for stranded nationals
Lebanon puts Bcharri town under lockdown as stranded nationals return