

Palestinian groups cancel mass Gaza rallies over coronavirus concerns

Author:

Reuters

ID:

1585420100010569400

Sat, 2020-03-28 13:20

GAZA: Palestinian groups in Gaza canceled mass rallies planned for next week along the border with Israel amid concerns about the spread of coronavirus in the densely-populated territory, organizers said on Saturday.

The rallies were called for March 30 to mark the second anniversary of the so-called "Great March of Return" which had prompted weekly protests by Palestinians seeking to regain access to land, now in Israel, from which their ancestors were forced to flee during the country's creation in 1948. "We call upon our people not to go to the Return encampments on March 30 and to stay home in order to maintain the safety of our people in the face of this lethal pandemic," said Khaled Al-Batsh, a senior member of the Islamic Jihad militant group.

Instead, Batsh called upon Gazans to mark the day by raising Palestinian flags on their rooftops and burning Israeli ones.

According to Gaza medical officials, 215 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli soldiers firing from the other side of the border during the protests, with another 8,000 suffering gunshot wounds. In the past few months, the weekly protests have been smaller.

One Israeli soldier was killed by a Palestinian sniper during the demonstrations. Israel said the protests were often used as cover for militants trying to breach the border and that many protesters had hurled rocks and explosives at its troops.

In 2019 UN Human Rights Council investigators said Israeli forces may have committed war crimes and crimes against humanity, with children and paramedics among the fatalities.

So far, nine out of the 97 coronavirus cases confirmed in the Palestinian territories have been confirmed in the Gaza Strip.

Gaza's hospitals, which were overwhelmed during the protests by gunshot wounds and amputations, are now gearing up for the challenge of containing the coronavirus in the coastal enclave of two million Palestinians, many living in refugee camps.



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Artist masks spread healthy message in virus-hit Gaza

[Sale of counterfeit face masks and surgical gloves on the rise in Egypt](#)

Author:

Sat, 2020-03-28 21:04

CAIRO: As demand for protective gear to combat the coronavirus disease COVID-19 rises, Egypt is witnessing a concurrent rise in counterfeit face masks and surgical gloves being offered for sale.

Egyptian security officials are in pursuit of a number of people who are attempting to profit from the global crisis by selling fake protective clothing. Officials in Sharqeya governorate, south of Cairo, have announced that they uncovered an unlicensed two-story factory manufacturing medical kits.

Security officials found 1,500 bogus facemasks, 500 pieces of cloth unrelated to factory work and 10 sewing machines.

In Giza governorate, security officials raided a factory producing fake face masks following a tipoff. Police discovered 200,000 face masks of unknown origin and arrested the factory's two unemployed owners.

Other raids in the Cairo resulted in the detention of a warehouse owner for the bottling of unlicensed sanitizers intended for sale at inflated prices. Police found 17 tons of ethyl alcohol and 2,500 empty bottles "ready to be filled" in the warehouse, all of which were undocumented and of unknown origin.

Elsewhere, five people were detained for renting a workshop in a neighborhood affiliated to Al-Maasara police station in Cairo. They were using the workshop to manufacture unlicensed medical face masks using materials of unknown origin and an unregistered logo to sell them.

Police reportedly discovered 45 meters of cloth for making face masks, 1,500 face masks that had been made in the workshop, "huge numbers" of illegally obtained face masks, and six sewing machines.

The Investigation Unit at the 6 of October police station in Cairo has detained the owner of a medical supply office, the owner of a laundry shop, and a tailor at the same shop for manufacturing medical face masks using cheap materials of unknown origin which do not conform to international standards. The detainees were reportedly packaging the face masks in fake sanitized packages to fool customers.

Parliamentarian Tarek Metwally, a member of the Industry Committee in the House, submitted a request for an examination of such items, saying that face masks and sanitizers of unknown origin have been found in market places. These products have not been manufactured in accordance with proper health standards and had been selling on a large scale, feeding on the public's fear of COVID-19 and desire to find ways to protect themselves.

Metwally claimed that counterfeit face masks that do not conform to the required standards and could actually transmit the virus. He also suggested that sanitizers made in unlicensed factories are dangerous "because no one knows what they are made of" and that they "might cause skin cancer."

The cost of face masks has skyrocketed in Egypt, particularly since some private schools – although they are currently shut – had informed parents that they should buy face masks on a daily basis.

Hatem El-Badawy, a member of the Pharmacies Owners Division at the Chambers of Commerce Union, called on authorities to monitor face mask manufacturers to guarantee high-quality products for consumers.

He told Arab News that black-market face masks harm consumers rather than protect them.

By Friday evening, Egypt had reported 495 infections, including 24 deaths,

since COVID-19 first appeared in the country in mid-February.



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Egypt reports 39 new coronavirus cases, 7 recoveries

[New coronavirus cases confirmed in Libya as fighting flares](#)

Author:

Reuters

ID:

1585416177430362500

Sat, 2020-03-28 17:16

TUNIS: Two new cases of the coronavirus have been confirmed in Libya, authorities said on Saturday, after the first was detected earlier this week, with international aid agencies warning of a disaster if it spreads. The two cases were discovered in Tripoli and Misrata, the National Center for Disease Control said, without giving any further details. The first,

confirmed on Monday, was a man who had recently returned to Libya from overseas.

Libya has been in turmoil since the toppling of strongman Muammar Qaddafi in 2011 and is split between two warring administrations. The conflict has wrecked the economy, fueled migrant smuggling and militancy, and disrupted oil supplies.

This week, fighting flared again as battles erupted on several fronts after months of suspected imports of weapons and foreign fighters in breach of an arms embargo.

The World Health Organization and other agencies have warned that the fighting will make it far harder to prevent the spread of the coronavirus in Libya, and the United Nations has called for an immediate humanitarian cease-fire.

In Friday's battles, focused in the southern suburbs of Tripoli and in the area between the coastal cities of Misrata and Sirte, dozens of fighters were reported killed on both sides.



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Libyan National Forces Alliance leader quarantined in Egypt after testing positive for coronavirus
Fighting escalates in Libya despite coronavirus threat

Tunisia gets 250 mln euros from EU to tackle coronavirus impact

Author:

Reuters

ID:

1585414697680291200

Sat, 2020-03-28 16:55

TUNIS: The European Union has granted Tunisia 250 million euros in aid to help it cope with the economic and social effects of the coronavirus outbreak, EU ambassador Patrice Bergamini said on Saturday in a tweet. Tunisia, which suffers from limited health infrastructure, is fighting to contain the outbreak after it said it had 227 confirmed cases and six deaths. Prime Minister Elyes Fakhfakh said last week that the government was allocating \$850 million to combat the economic and social effects of the health crisis.

The International Monetary Fund will disburse \$400 million to help the country face the effects of the crisis, finance minister Nizar Yaich has said.

Tunisia now expects an economic recession, prompting the central bank this month to cut its key interest rate by 100 basis points from 7.75%.

Fakhfakh has said the government cut its growth forecast this year to 1% from 2.7% in part due of coronavirus crisis.



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Tunisian handed 10 years for ricin bomb plot in Germany
Brits stranded in Tunisia as national carrier staff fear flying amid coronavirus

[In Iraq, deadly coronavirus terrifies even doctors hardened by conflict](#)

Author:

Sat, 2020-03-28 01:28

BADGHDAD: Through decades of conflict, Dr. Haidar Hantoush has watched wounded soldiers and civilians flood into Iraq's emergency wards. But he's never been so scared.

"Violence we can just about handle. Patients stream into hospitals for hours at a time – but you can see how many there are. You get a lull to prepare for

the next round,” said Hantoush, public health director for southern province Dhi Qar.

“With coronavirus, there’s no safe place. We don’t know when the number of cases will explode ... Even the world’s best health care systems can’t cope.” Doctors and nurses across Iraq have treated hundreds of thousands of victims during decades of civil war, violence and sanctions, while watching what was once one of the best health care systems in the Middle East crumble.

Now, they say Iraq may be singularly unprepared for the coronavirus.

Iraq has a porous border with Iran, the worst-hit Middle Eastern country so far. The Iraqi religious calendar is dotted with annual pilgrimages, some of the biggest mass gatherings on earth, which typically attract millions of worshippers.

And since last year, Iraq’s major cities have seen mass anti-government demonstrations that killed hundreds of people. State institutions are paralyzed by political deadlock after the government resigned and politicians failed to form a new one.

So far, Iraq has counted more than 450 coronavirus disease (COVID-19) cases and 40 deaths, most of them in the past week. But doctors worry that those figures barely scratch the surface of an epidemic that may already be raging undetected across crowded cities.

“There are many unrecorded cases. People aren’t getting tested or taking it seriously,” Hantoush said.

Loudspeakers on mosques in Baghdad blast out government guidelines daily urging people to stay at home and get tested if they think they are ill. A curfew is in place until April 11. Borders are shut and international flights halted.

With coronavirus, there’s no safe place. We don’t know when the number of cases will explode ... Even the world’s best health care systems can’t cope.

Dr. Haidar Hantoush, Public health director

But getting the message across is difficult in a country with deep distrust of the authorities. Tribes have sometimes refused to allow women with symptoms to be isolated because they do not want them to be alone in hospitals, Hantoush said.

Thousands of Iraqis participated in the most recent of Iraq’s major pilgrimages, to the shrine of a Shiite Imam in Baghdad, where they crowded in defiance of the curfew.

“We’re now asking pilgrims to self-isolate for 14 days,” said Dr. Laith Jubr, 30, who works at a Baghdad ward testing suspected coronavirus cases.

The hospital had three deaths from the virus in the last week, he said, and several staff tested positive. Some people showing symptoms refused to be tested because they did not want to spend time in isolation.

“If this gets bigger it could be beyond our control. We could have 1,000 cases next week. There’s a lack of ventilators and other equipment – maybe 10 ventilators at our hospital.”

Jubr said many Iraqis were nonchalant because they thought they had “seen it all” through years of war.

“This is dangerous. We’re facing a hidden enemy that requires not just doctors but the whole population to combat it.”

Security forces deployed on Friday to Baghdad’s densely populated Sadr City district, home to millions including many pilgrims, to enforce the curfew, a statement said.

The UN praised Iraq’s early measures in closing borders last month but has urged respect for the curfew.

One Baghdad doctor said a sharp rise in cases is imminent.

“We’re bracing for what happens in the next two weeks. And we can’t cope,” he said.



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As world locks down, Qatari construction presses ahead
Abu Dhabi crown prince, Syrian president discuss coronavirus