

Lebanese parliament shut due to coronavirus fears

Author:

Tue, 2020-03-10 02:39

BEIRUT: Lebanon's parliament has decided to close MPs' offices and postpone parliamentary meetings for one week amid the spread of coronavirus in the country, said Health Minister Hamad Hassan, with 41 confirmed cases. A Health Ministry source said: "The new cases in Lebanon, including three children, were the result of contact with those who were already infected in the country."

Dr. Abdul Rahman Bizri, a specialist in infectious diseases and a member of the emergency committee on coronavirus, told Arab News: "Coronavirus is still in the early stages of spreading in the country. We're still able to follow up on the people who've been infected, where they came from, and those to whom they might have transmitted the virus."

He said: "The situation in Lebanon is still reassuring to some extent, compared to other countries around the world."

He added: "The first case, who came from (the Iranian city of) Qom, has recovered but is still in hospital because she's a carrier and we don't know when she'll be virus-free. Other people have also recovered, including children, who are able to heal from the virus unlike the elderly."

Meetings are being held with "university hospitals across Lebanon to start conducting coronavirus tests and using their laboratories," Bizri said.

Former Hezbollah MP Mahmoud Qamati denied rumors that he has coronavirus, and his media office said he "would not hide any news related to his health."

Lebanon's Middle East Airlines announced on Monday the suspension of its flights from and to Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Qatar until further notice, "in light of the decisions taken by some countries regarding travel bans to avoid the spread of the new coronavirus." The airline waived all penalties and restrictions related to its tickets.

As no coronavirus cases have yet been reported in Turkey, Arab News has learned that many travelers coming from countries that have suspended flights to Lebanon are flying to Turkey to secure their arrival to Lebanon.

The situation in Lebanon is still reassuring to some extent, compared to other countries around the world.

Dr. Abdul Rahman Bizri, Specialist in infectious diseases

Saudi Ambassador to Lebanon Walid Bukhari retweeted the decision to include Lebanon in the list of countries that the Kingdom has suspended travel from and to, not including evacuations and trade trips.

While cleaning and disinfection operations continue in Lebanese official and private institutions, people have been going out less as Tourism Minister Ramzi Al-Musharafieh ordered the closure of bars and nightclubs until March 15.

He has also banned concerts and music shows in restaurants and cafes, and urged “restaurants to commit to preventive measures and safety instructions to limit the spread of coronavirus.” Nurseries, schools, universities, cinemas and gyms across the country remain closed.

Meanwhile, a Lebanese citizen holding Canadian nationality who escaped the coronavirus emergency section at Rafik Hariri Hospital in Beirut was arrested at the airport as he tried to flee to Canada.

He had refused to get tested after showing symptoms, but was returned to the hospital for testing.

Meanwhile, Dr. Ahmed Al-Samadi, director of Saida Governmental Hospital, confirmed a new case of coronavirus at the hospital on Sunday night.

He said a patient from the Mieh Mieh Palestinian refugee camp had arrived at the hospital with a high fever.

The patient was placed in quarantine and was then taken to Rafik Hariri Hospital for testing.

Hospitals receiving suspicious cases are implementing strict sterilization procedures to reassure other patients in light of rumors about cases being secretly treated.

Some hospitals have even decided to ban patient visits.

Hospital workers have also been receiving training to deal with suspicious cases.



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Coronavirus outbreak hits Turkish business sectors hard
Saudi health ministry announces five new coronavirus cases

Jailed UK-Iranian 'in deep distress'

Author:

Tue, 2020-03-10 02:05

LONDON: Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, a British-Iranian woman jailed in Tehran, has been caused deep distress after a promise of temporary release was broken by authorities, and she has still not been tested for coronavirus, her family have said.

Fears of the virus spreading rapidly in Iranian prisons prompted the government to temporarily release some inmates as a containment measure. Zaghari-Ratcliffe was told last week that her release was imminent as part of these precautions, only to later be informed that she would not in fact be released.

She had packed her bags and was ready to leave the prison last Wednesday, before authorities reversed their decision over the weekend, The Guardian reported.

Her husband Richard Ratcliffe raised fears of her having coronavirus last week, and has since accused Iranian authorities of playing mind games.

In a statement released by The Free Nazanin Campaign, Ratcliffe said: "(The doctor) confirmed to her that her symptoms were clearly a virus and were consistent with coronavirus, but he also confessed he was unable to test her with a testing kit."

NUMBER

237 – Iran on Monday announced 43 new deaths from the novel coronavirus in the past 24 hours, bringing the overall toll to 237 dead, one of the world's highest.

This kind of treatment, the campaign said, is designed to torment her and her family. "The effect is a kind of gaslighting, raising hopes before promises are not kept, and then a kind of guilt and self-blame, as the regime manages another distraction and avoids accountability for its acts of abuse," it added.

"Cumulatively the experience is not just cruel and degrading. The cumulative effect – of promising to release and failing to do so, again and again – is a kind of mental torture. That is its design."

Ratcliffe said: "Dangling publicly the idea of furlough without yet carrying it through has been an act of media management by the Iranian authorities. It has

aimed at distracting media attention from the refusal to test for coronavirus, and the fact thousands of prisoners, including British ones, have just been left in harm's way."

Zaghari-Ratcliffe was detained in April 2016 and later sentenced to five

years in prison over allegations, which she denies, of plotting to overthrow the Iranian government.

Iran has struggled to contain the coronavirus outbreak, with the latest figures indicating roughly 200 deaths and up to 6,000 infections.



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UK summons Iran ambassador over case of British-Iranian aid worker Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe
Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe freed temporarily from Iranian prison: Husband

[Coronavirus outbreak hits Turkish business sectors hard](#)

Tue, 2020-03-10 01:56

ANKARA: The global impact of the coronavirus outbreak has dealt a blow to the Turkish economy, especially in the tourism, trade and marble sectors, despite the deadly and fast-spreading virus not even officially being confirmed as having been detected in the country so far.

Turkey has a trade volume of \$21 billion with China, while transportation costs have risen significantly because of logistics blockages and production

delays after the coronavirus epidemic.

Turkey has had to close border crossings with its eastern neighbor Iran, which has been hit hard by the outbreak, a move that undermined not only the bilateral trade that represents only 1.6 percent of Turkey's foreign trade volume, but also the tourism sector, with almost 2 million Iranian visitors to Turkey annually.

On March 2, Turkey's health minister also warned there may be infected individuals in the country, although there has been no official confirmation of any cases up to now.

The World Health Organization recently canceled a high-level and multinational consultation conference in Istanbul between March 10-12 as a precaution.

HIGHLIGHT

Turkey has had to close border crossings with its eastern neighbor Iran, which has been hit hard by the outbreak.

In the meantime, various Turkish companies active in the marble sector are facing the threat of bankruptcy. Up until the virus outbreak, Turkish exporters were selling about 5 million tons of marble blocks to China, making it the top importer.

An annual natural stone fair in China, due for March 16-19, has been canceled, setting orders back months.

The sectoral loss is expected to amount to around \$450 million this year, because China and Italy – another coronavirus afflicted country – were the biggest buyers of Turkish marble.



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Saudi Arabia gets to grips with coronavirus
Philippines declares state of emergency over coronavirus

[Ankara, Brussels open talks to find solution to escalating refugee crisis](#)

Tue, 2020-03-10 01:29

ANKARA: Crisis talks on the Syrian refugee emergency began on Monday in Brussels between senior officials from the EU and Turkey, including Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

It followed Ankara's announcement on Feb. 28 that it was opening its borders to allow refugees to cross into Europe.

Thousands of refugees gathered along Turkey's border with Greece after Ankara's announcement, and Greek police used tear gas and water cannon to control the crowds.

During the tense talks, Germany, which has criticized Turkey for "negotiating on the backs of the weakest," said that a "coalition of the willing" among EU member states will take in 1,500 unaccompanied children from Greek refugee

camps who are under the age of 14 or in need of urgent medical help. Erdogan ordered the Turkish coast guard to prevent risky Aegean Sea crossings on Friday, but land crossings remain open.

As Syrians continue to flee rebel-held Idlib province amid assaults by Syrian regime forces, Ankara says it cannot take any more refugees as it already hosts four million. Emphasizing the need for burden-sharing, Turkey accuses the authorities in Brussels of falling short of their commitments on financial support to help care for refugees.

Following a meeting of European foreign ministers in Zagreb on Friday, EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said member states are willing to offer additional financial support to Turkey beyond the 6 billion euros (\$6.9 billion) promised in 2016, but added that "they cannot accept that migrants are being used as a source of pressure."

Kadri Tastan, a Brussels-based senior fellow of US public policy think tank the German Marshall Fund, said: "This latest crisis shows once again that the EU acts only in emergency situations and it has no long-term strategy for such types of crises."

BACKGROUND

Turkey hosts more than 3.5 million Syrian refugees, and Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has demanded that Europe shoulder more of the burden of caring for them.

"Erdogan kept repeating that he was going to open the valve; Europeans thought it was just a blackmail. So the Europeans are reacting again in an emergency."

Brussels expects Turkey to honor its side of the 2016 EU-Turkey deal by ensuring refugees remain within its borders rather than allowing them to freely cross into the EU.

Given the strength of feeling and the reaction in European nations to Ankara's decision to open its border, Tastan said, the EU is obliged to cooperate with Ankara. This is surely not being done voluntarily, he added. Erdogan met European Council President Charles Michel and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen on Monday. The meetings were purely consultative, designed to de-escalate the crisis and open a dialogue.

"The heads of European institutions have no power to decide anything on this very controversial subject," said Tastan.

"Decisions will be taken at the European Council and by the governments of the member states."

He added that Germany and the Netherlands are likely to spearhead attempts to reach a new consensus among the divergent views within the EU bloc.

"In any case, visa travel for Turkish citizens and the modernization of the Custom Union will not be linked to the question of migrants by Europeans this time," he said.

The EU is not expected to extend any significant assistance to Turkey's ongoing efforts to create a safe zone inside Syria. Borrell recently told reporters "we are not that powerful to create a safe zone."

Brussels prefers instead to consult with and influence the UN and NATO,

rather than assuming any burden in Syrian territory.



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Turkey's former economy tsar challenges Erdogan with new party Battle for Syria's Idlib takes its toll on migrants, refugees and Turkey's ties with EU

[Middle East countries report more cases of coronavirus](#)

Mon, 2020-03-09 00:54

DUBAI, BEIRUT: Several Gulf Arab states recorded new cases of the coronavirus on Sunday as 6,900 confirmed cases of the new virus were reported across the region.

Iran has emerged as a center for the disease in the Middle East. It says the new coronavirus has killed 49 more people in the last 24 hours, bringing the death toll to 194 amid 6,566 confirmed cases in the Islamic republic, according to Health Ministry spokesman

Kianoush Jahanpour, who gave the figures at a news conference Sunday. In neighboring Kuwait, the Health Ministry reported two more infections, raising the total to 64. Qatari authorities announced three more cases to bring the total to 15.

Kuwait's central bank said on Sunday it was setting up a 10 million dinar (\$32.79 million) fund to support state efforts to fight the virus.

Gulf states have canceled or postponed conferences, sporting events and concerts due to the coronavirus outbreak.

Bahrain

The Bahrain Formula One Grand Prix will go ahead on March 22 without fans due to the coronavirus crisis, a blow to the Gulf Arab state's important tourism sector.

Bahrain, which is hosting the second round of the Formula One season at the Sakhir circuit outside Manama, has reported 83 cases of the virus, mostly linked to people who had traveled to Iran.

"Bahrain has made the decision to hold this year's (race) as a participants-only event," organizers said on Sunday.

In the UAE, a Wizz Air press conference in Abu Dhabi, planned on Tuesday, has been canceled, organizers said.

Oman has canceled all events at the Royal Opera House in the capital Muscat that had been scheduled for March and April as well as tours of the site, state news agency ONA said on Sunday.

Syria

Aid agencies are moving to prevent the coronavirus outbreak in conflict-plagued northwestern Syria, where damaged health infrastructure and massive displacement make containment a nearly impossible task.

Syria has not yet confirmed any coronavirus cases but its "fragile health systems may not have the capacity to detect and respond" to an epidemic, Hedinn Halldorsson, a spokesman for the World Health Organization (WHO), told AFP.

The risk of an outbreak is especially high and most alarming in Syria's northwest, where some 3 million people are trapped in a shrinking rebel bastion battered by months of bombardment.

FASTFACT

The risk of an outbreak is especially high and most alarming in Syria's northwest, where some 3 million people are trapped in a shrinking rebel bastion.

With close to 1 million people displaced since December by a Russian-backed regime offensive on the Idlib region, overcrowded settlements are teeming with

fresh arrivals, and many of the displaced are sleeping rough in freezing temperatures.

Medical facilities have been targeted during the latest bombing campaign, further reducing the capacity of a health system ravaged by nearly nine years of conflict.

Unable to provide services from government-held territory inside Syria, the WHO provides cross-border assistance to rebel-held Idlib via Turkey, Halldorsson said.

Health personnel are being trained, “and laboratories in both Idlib and Ankara are being prepared and stocked to safely test and diagnose the virus,” he added.

A Russian-Turkish cease-fire deal went into effect on Friday, bringing relative calm to Idlib for the first time in months. But many fear the fighting will eventually resume, in a further challenge to efforts to prevent a COVID-19 outbreak.

Misty Buswell of the International Rescue Committee said the situation in Idlib was “especially ripe for a spread” of the virus.

“An outbreak would be devastating for thousands whose health status is already compromised due to lack of sufficient food, clean water and exposure to cold weather,” she told AFP.

Buswell said the IRC was focusing on “enhancing preventative measures” by raising awareness, providing medical supplies and strengthening disease surveillance and reporting systems.

“If an outbreak is reported, we will work with local health actors to activate a response,” Buswell said.

Mustafa Al-Abdo, the deputy head of Idlib’s opposition-run health department, appealed for the formation of an isolated medical center that would be ready to receive cases.

He also called on aid agencies to equip health workers with testing kits, medical masks, gloves and other equipment for prevention.



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Virus hits Bangladesh; Seoul begins drive-thru testing system 'More countries will have to adopt Italy-style virus steps'