

Virus hits 100,000 cases as it upends lives, livelihoods

Sat, 2020-03-07 01:56

BANGKOK: Crossing more borders, the new coronavirus hit a milestone on Friday, infecting more than 100,000 people worldwide as it wove itself deeper into the daily lives of millions, infecting the powerful, the unprotected poor and the vast masses in between.

The virus, which has killed nearly 3,400 people, edged into more and more US states, popped up in new countries and even breached the halls of the Vatican. It forced mosques in Iran and beyond to halt weekly Muslim prayers. It brought Israeli and Palestinian authorities together to block pilgrims from Jesus' birthplace in Bethlehem. And it upended Japan's plans for the Olympic torch parade.

"Who is going to feed their families?" asked Elias Al-Arja, head of a hotel owners' union in Bethlehem in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, where tourists have been banned and the storied Church of the Nativity shuttered.

Questions swirled around whether Iran could control its outbreak, as the number of reported infections jumped beyond 4,700 on Friday, with 124 deaths. Iran planned to set up checkpoints to limit travel, urged people to stop using paper money and had firefighters spray disinfectant on an 18-km length of Tehran's most famous avenue.

"It would be great if they did it every day," grocery store owner Reza Razaienejad said after firefighters sprayed outside his shop. "It should not be just a one-time thing."

The 100,000 figure of global infections is largely symbolic but dwarfs other major outbreaks in recent decades. SARS, MERS and Ebola affected far fewer people but had higher mortality rates.

The economic impact grew along with the number of infected people. World stocks and the price of oil dropped sharply again Friday.

A sharp drop in travel and a broader economic downturn linked to the outbreak threatened to hit already-struggling communities for months to come.

The head of the UN's food agency, the World Food Programme, warned of the potential for "absolute devastation" as the outbreak's effects ripple through Africa and the Middle East.

India scrambled to stave off an epidemic that could overwhelm its under-funded and under-staffed health care system, with not nearly enough labs or hospitals for its 1.3 billion people.

Yet even as COVID-19, the disease caused by the virus, reached new territory, it was retreating in China, where it first emerged late last year, and slowing in South Korea, another major epicenter.

More than half of those who contracted the virus have now recovered, and US health officials said they expect a far lower death rate than the World Health Organization's international estimate of 3.4 percent – a high rate that doesn't account for mild cases that go uncounted.

HIGHLIGHTS

- First cases of virus reported in several new countries.
- Virus breaches the halls of the Vatican City in Italy.
- China reports 143 new cases on Friday, the same as a day earlier.

The fear and the crackdowns that swept through China are now shifting westward, as workers in Europe and the US stay home, authorities vigorously sanitize public places and consumers flock to stores for household staples. "The Western world is now following some of China's playbook," said Chris Beauchamp, a market analyst at the financial firm IG.

The spectacle of a cruise ship ordered to stay at sea off the California coast over virus fears replicated ones weeks ago on the other side of the globe in which hundreds of people were infected on a ship even during a quarantine.

Thailand on Friday blocked a separate cruise ship from docking, worried that it carried dozens of passengers from Italy, the center of Europe's epidemic, which has 148 virus deaths. No one on that ship was known to be infected. In the US the number of cases passed 230 people scattered across 18 states. President Donald Trump canceled a trip to the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta even as he prepared to sign a \$8.3 billion bill for vaccines, tests, potential treatments, and to help state and local governments.

China reported 143 new cases Friday, the same as a day earlier and about one-third what the country was seeing a week ago. Just a month ago, China was reporting several thousand new cases a day. The problem has now flipped, with the outbreak moving to Europe – where Italy, Germany and France had the most cases – and beyond.

South Korea reported 505 additional cases on Friday, down from a high of 851 on Tuesday.

The new virus has spread to about 90 countries. The Netherlands reported its first virus death Friday while Serbia, Slovakia, Peru and Cameroon announced their first infections. Even Vatican City was hit, with the tiny city-state confirming its first case Friday but not saying who was infected. The Vatican has insisted that 83-year-old Pope Francis, who has been sick, only has a cold.

The new coronavirus is known to affect the elderly more than other groups. And in the United States, officials in Washington state are so concerned about having space to care for the sick they were expected to close a \$4 million deal Friday to take over a roadside motel. The plan to turn the 84-room EconoLodge into a quarantine facility was not sitting well with everyone, including the police chief.

To the south, cruise passengers awaited test results aboard the Grand Princess ship. The vessel, with 3,500 aboard, was ordered to stay at sea after a traveler from its previous voyage died of the coronavirus and at least four others were infected. The cruise line said samples were collected from 45 passengers and crew members and results were expected later Friday. The Grand Princess is operated by the same line as the Diamond Princess, which was quarantined at a Japanese port last month. More than 700 people on

board were infected.

In a sign of hope, a woman infected with the virus gave birth to a girl in Qom, the Iranian Shiite holy city particularly hard-hit by the virus.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[China Coronavirus](#)

[Coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#)

Twitter moves to protect conversations on COVID-19 in MENA region
Egypt registers 12 new coronavirus cases on Nile cruise ship

[Al-Qaeda suffers heavy losses in Yemen conflicts](#)

Author:

Sat, 2020-03-07 01:38

AL-MUKALLA: The Yemen-based Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, also known as AQAP, has been weakened by the deaths of its leaders at the hands of US drones, ground attacks by Yemeni troops and rivalry with other groups, experts said.

“Al-Qaeda is going through hard times with its leaders’ priority now to hold the group together,” Saleh Al-Baydhani, a Yemeni political analyst, told Arab News.

Al-Qaeda's most dangerous branch was established in 2009 and was responsible for dozens of deadly attacks against army and security targets, that claimed the lives of hundreds of soldiers and civilians.

During its heyday that followed, militants stormed many Yemeni cities, including a large swath of land in the southern province of Abyan in 2011, and in 2015 they stormed the city of Al-Mukalla, Yemen's fifth largest city and neighboring regions on the Arabian Sea.

But over the last three years, its ability to expand on the ground has diminished, which many analysts attributed to the killing of the group's leaders and successful military operations.

Setback

AQAP's latest blow was the killing of their leader Qassem Al-Rimi in a US drone strike last month. Analysts argue that the death of Al-Rimi was the last straw that would leave its mark on the group's ability to regroup for years to come.

"Al-Rimi was the last pillar of Al-Qaeda," Saeed Obeid Al-Jumahi, a Yemeni terrorism expert, told Al-Arabyia TV. "The other two pillars were Nasser Al-Waheshi and Saeed Al-Shehri who were killed by US drones."

Al-Qaeda is going through hard times with its leaders' priority now to hold the group together.

Saleh Al-Baydhani, a Yemeni political analyst

Since capturing Al-Mukalla in 2015, US forces have managed to kill dozens of militants including several senior leaders. Al-Baydhani said the spiraling number of deaths by drone strikes showed the scale of the US's infiltration of the militants.

"The infiltration has prompted Al-Qaeda to stop recruiting new fighters. They also took a low profile to avoid the drones," said Al-Baydhani, adding that the death of AQAP leaders had left a vacuum which crippled the militants' ability to expand on the ground.

"The last three recordings of alleged spies showed that the group was greatly dented," Al-Baydhani said, referring to recent videos by Al-Qaeda media in which militants execute alleged spies.

New forces

At the beginning of Saudi-led military operations in Yemen, AQAP militants seized control of Al-Mukalla and other areas in Hadramout, exploiting the fall of security and military units.

Many analysts argued at the time that the militants would continue expanding across Yemen during the war. But the predictions did not come true as the coalition helped rebuild Yemen's military and security forces, and backed them during attacks on AQAP.

Backed by air cover from the Saudi-led coalition, Yemeni troops pushed AQAP militants from their strongholds in Abyan, Shabwa, Lahj and Hadramout.

"The coalition-backed forces reached the group's strongholds. The US drones usually hit the leaders from the air without putting troops on the ground,"

Al-Jumahi said.

In August last year, fighting broke out between army troops and the separatist Southern Transitional Council in the southern provinces of Abyan and Shabwa. Analysts argue that if the fighting had occurred 10 years ago, the militants would have exploited the insecurity to make a comeback.

"At the moment, the organization's priority is maintaining coherence and reducing infiltrations," Al-Baydhani said.

Last week, villagers in the central province of Baydha, where AQAP fighters are thought to be hiding, said that suspected US planes dropped leaflets urging them to help finding three AQAP militants: Khaled Batarfi, the group's new leader; Saad Atef, Al-Qaeda's emir in Shabwa; and Ammar Al-Sanani.

Residents would be rewarded with \$6 million for information that would help with finding the three militants.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Al-Qaeda](#)

Saudi Arabia carries out relief projects in Yemen, Bangladesh
Saudi, US officials discuss Yemen's development

[EU countries welcome cease-fire in](#)

Syria, urge aid access

Sat, 2020-03-07 01:28

ZAGREB: EU countries gave a cautious welcome on Friday to a Russian-Turkish cease-fire in Syria but urged warring parties to allow in more humanitarian aid.

Foreign ministers from the 27 EU states held talks in Zagreb on the crisis in the northwestern Syrian province of Idlib, where Ankara is battling Moscow-backed government forces.

"For sure I am pleased for the cease-fire, the cease-fire is good news. At least it's goodwill – let's see how it works," Josep Borrell said.

Nearly a million civilians have fled their homes due to the Idlib fighting, dubbed by the UN the worst humanitarian emergency since the start of the Syrian civil war in 2011.

The ministers called "in the strongest possible terms" for the cease-fire to be implemented to protect civilians and "to enable the unhindered delivery of humanitarian assistance by the international community."

The EU has announced €60 million (\$68 million) in humanitarian assistance for northwest Syria, as part of a €170 million package for those in need across the war-torn country. But Borrell warned that logistics were a bigger challenge than financing – the difficulties of trucking in supplies to feed and shelter a million people in the middle of winter.

"It is important now to concentrate on humanitarian aid and I would welcome if Russia would respect the concept of humanitarian aid corridors to be widened," Estonian Foreign Minister Urmas Reinsalu said.

Ireland's Simon Coveney said there was "relief" among EU countries at news of the cease-fire.

HIGHLIGHT

Foreign ministers from the 27 EU states held talks in Zagreb on the crisis in the northwestern Syrian province of Idlib, where Ankara is battling Moscow-backed government forces.

"But there's still an extraordinary humanitarian challenge that I think we all face in terms of the sheer numbers of refugees that had been displaced because of the conflict there," Coveney added.

Some EU countries, notably the Netherlands, had called for a no-fly zone over Idlib to stop the regime bombing civilians.

But the EU has no power to implement or enforce such a measure and officials are privately skeptical.

"We all know this would need UN mandate, would you get that?" a senior EU official said, alluding to Russia's right of veto at the UN Security Council.

"A no-fly zone always sounds nice but needs to be militarily enforced. Who would do that?"

The ministers' statement did not mention a no-fly zone but stressed the importance of protecting civilians from air attacks.

Intense fighting has killed dozens of Turkish soldiers in Idlib in recent weeks, as Ankara launched a direct offensive against Bashar Assad's forces for the first time.

The escalating crisis prompted Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to open Turkey's border with Greece to refugees and migrants.

Turkey has demanded the EU's support for its actions in Syria and some in the bloc have accused Erdogan of using migrants as "blackmail."

In their statement, the ministers repeated their rejection of "Turkey's use of migratory pressure for political purposes," after a week of dramatic scenes on the Turkish-Greek border.

"Illegal crossings will not be tolerated. In this regard, the EU and its member states will take all necessary measures, in accordance with EU and international law," the statement said.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Syria](#)

[Turkey](#)

[Idlib](#)

Turkey accused of forcefully moving migrants to Greek border
Turkey-Russia deal: An ideal outcome for all?

Turkey accused of forcefully moving migrants to Greek border

Sat, 2020-03-07 01:21

ANKARA: Around 400 refugees from a repatriation center in the Turkish capital Ankara have been forcibly transported to the Greek border since last Saturday, a lawyers' group has claimed.

The move came soon after Turkey said it could no longer stop those who wanted to reach European soil.

Upheaval

Since then thousands of migrants – not only from Syria, but also from other Middle Eastern countries and Afghanistan – have flocked to Turkey's land and sea borders with Greece and Bulgaria.

The EU's Foreign Affairs Council on Friday criticized the ongoing humanitarian crisis along the Turkish-Greek border.

"While acknowledging the increased migratory burden and risks Turkey is facing on its territory and the substantial efforts it has made in hosting 3.7 million migrants and refugees, the EU reiterates its serious concern over the situation at the Greek-Turkish border and strongly rejects Turkey's use of migratory pressure for political purposes," the EU said in a statement.

SPEEDREAD

The Turkish Interior Ministry, responsible for administering the repatriation centers, has not denied the allegations about the removal of the refugees from the Ankara site.

The chair of the Ankara Bar Association's Migrant Rights Center, Onur Gelbal, said a number of migrants who resisted the deportation had managed to stay on at the Ankara center.

There are 28 repatriation centers throughout Turkey, most established with EU funds, which together can hold a maximum of 20,000 people.

The Turkish Interior Ministry, which is responsible for administering the repatriation centers, has not denied the allegations about the removal of the refugees from the Ankara site, and the Ankara Bar Association is expected next week to formally accuse the ministry of neglect of duty and file a complaint to the prosecutor's office.

"We were informed by our attorney colleagues who received phone calls on Saturday night from their clients who were forced onto buses to be transported to the border," Gelbal told Arab News.

Border tense

The association assigned staff to the Turkish-Greek border to track migrants who had been transported from the Ankara center.

Many of the refugees massed on the border have been pushed back by Greek

authorities and now find themselves stranded without any basic facilities. With only 200 migrants staying back, the repatriation center in Ankara is almost empty. Those repatriated by force were mainly Iraqis and Afghans and included women and children.

Amid the ongoing stand-off between Ankara and Brussels over migration management, one town in northern Turkey has offered free transport to ferry migrants to the Greek border.

Dubbed as a “walk toward hope,” several foundations working with migrants in Turkey have also allegedly arranged buses to the border from various Turkish cities including Istanbul where many migrants are located.

However, the Foreign Affairs Council reiterated its commitment to “effectively protect the EU’s external borders” and to not tolerate illegal crossings by land or sea.

“Migrants should not be encouraged to attempt illegal crossings by land or sea. The council calls on the Turkish government and all actors and organizations on the ground to relay this message and counter the dissemination of false information,” its statement added.





Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Turkey](#)

[Syria](#)

Turkey-Russia deal: An ideal outcome for all?EU criticizes Turkey on migration as border clashes resume

[Seven cases of deadly virus found in Palestine](#)

Author:

Fri, 2020-03-06 02:48

GAZA CITY: Palestine has announced seven cases of coronavirus in the city of Bethlehem, in the south of the West Bank, and has declared a state of emergency in the cities of Bethlehem and Jericho.

Local websites reported that four people were infected with the virus in a hotel in the Beit Jala area of Bethlehem. Ministry of Health spokesman, Tareef Ashour, said: "We took samples from Polish and American foreigners, and samples from 21 workers in a hotel.

"Most of the tests are negative, but there are suspicious cases and we have transferred some samples for examination to Israeli labs in order to make

sure of the infection,” he added.

Palestinian Minister of Health May Kila told a news conference in Bethlehem on Thursday that the results would be released in the coming hours, and that the ministry was in continuous communication with Tel HaShomer Hospital in Israel.

Following that announcement, the Ministry of Health declared a series of measures calling for the closure of educational institutions, mosques and churches in Bethlehem for two weeks.

The Football Federation announced the suspension of sports matches in a number of Palestinian cities in the West Bank, in a move to prevent mass gatherings.

The Federation of Churches also announced the closure of the Church of the Nativity in the city until further notice on the advice of the Ministry of Health, and the Palestinian Waqfs Ministry announced the cancelation of Friday prayers in Bethlehem’s 27 mosques.

Among the measures announced Wednesday by the Palestinian Health Ministry were increasing examinations at the crossing between the West Bank and Jordan, where one case has been announced so far.

Hamas, which rules the Gaza Strip, has adopted a similar approach for those crossing from Egypt into the Palestinian enclave. All those return from high risk countries will be required to enter self-isolation for 14 days.

The Palestinian Authority also announced the prohibition of gatherings of more than 1,000 people in open areas, more than 50 people in one closed place and the postponing of international conferences scheduled to take place in the Palestinian Territories

In addition, the ministry said Palestinian officials would be prohibited from flying overseas and all military courses abroad were suspended until further notice.

The Ministry of Health called on Palestinians not to panic, adding the measures taken followed international measures to prevent the spread of the virus

The owner of a hotel in Bethlehem told Arab News that the reservations of 50 rooms were canceled for delegations that were expected to arrive in the city on Thursday, due to an order by Ministry of Tourism.

The Jerusalem Waqfs Department called on worshippers coming to pray at Al-Aqsa Mosque to follow safety procedures and maintain hygiene, while it did not announce the cancelation of Friday prayers.

In Israel, the Ministry of Health has announced 15 cases of coronavirus infection, most of them Israelis returning from abroad, and has imposed strict measures to prevent the spread of the virus, including quarantining tens of thousands and stopping flights to and from 13 affected countries.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[China](#) [Coronavirus](#)

[Palestine](#)

Saudi Arabia says Iran's actions have helped spread coronavirus around the world