

Virus spreading worldwide as more countries report first cases

Author:

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DUBAI, GENEVA: The rapid spread of coronavirus raised fears of a pandemic on Friday, with five countries reporting their first cases, the World Health Organization (WHO) warning it could spread worldwide and Switzerland canceling the giant Geneva car show.

"The outbreak is getting bigger," WHO spokesman Christian Lindmeier told a news briefing in Geneva.

"The scenario of the coronavirus reaching multiple countries, if not all countries around the world, is something we have been looking at and warning against since quite a while."

The outbreak of the new virus in Iran has been dramatic – the head of Iran's task force to stop the illness, known as COVID-19, was seen coughing, sweating and wheezing across televised interviews before acknowledging he was infected. Then days later, a visibly pale official sat only meters away from President Hassan Rouhani and other top leaders before she too reportedly came down with the virus.

Iran's success – or failure – in combating the virus will have an impact far beyond the country's 80 million people as the majority of cases in the Mideast now link back to Iran.

"All organizations are trying their best to combat this virus," Health Ministry spokesman Kianoush Jahanpour said.

On Friday, Jahanpour again reported a huge spike in cases, saying there were now 388 confirmed coronavirus cases in Iran and 34 deaths. In brief remarks from Tehran, he cautioned the number of cases would likely further spike as Iran now has 15 laboratories testing samples.

In Tehran and other cities, authorities canceled Friday prayer services to limit crowds. In the capital, Radio Tehran that typically carries the prayer played only traditional Iranian music. Universities are to remain closed another week.

Questions still remain over Iran's count. Experts, including at the WHO, worry the Islamic republic may be underreporting the number of cases in the country.

Germany

There are almost 60 confirmed cases of coronavirus in Germany, a spokeswoman for the Health Ministry said on Friday, adding that number included people who were now healthy again.

Asked how many confirmed cases of coronavirus in Germany there were, she said: "At the moment in Germany we have almost 60 but it's a very dynamic situation, as we keep saying."

Lebanon

Lebanon announced on Friday it would bar entry to nonresident foreigners from the four countries most affected by the coronavirus outbreak, a day after

announcing its third case.

The Middle Eastern country will deny entry to people arriving from China, South Korea, Iran and Italy, the state news agency reported, without saying when the measure would come into effect.

All airlines operating flights to Beirut have been notified of the ban, which does not affect Lebanese citizens or foreigners holding a residency permit, the agency added.

Lebanon's Health Ministry on Thursday confirmed another coronavirus case. All three individuals infected – two Lebanese and an Iranian – arrived recently from Iran, the worst-hit country in the region. Despite government efforts to reassure the Lebanese, videos have circulated on social media denouncing what users say are insufficient screenings for the virus at Beirut's international airport.

Nigeria

Nigerian authorities on Friday reported the first confirmed case of the new coronavirus in sub-Saharan Africa as the outbreak spread to a region with some of the world's weakest health systems.

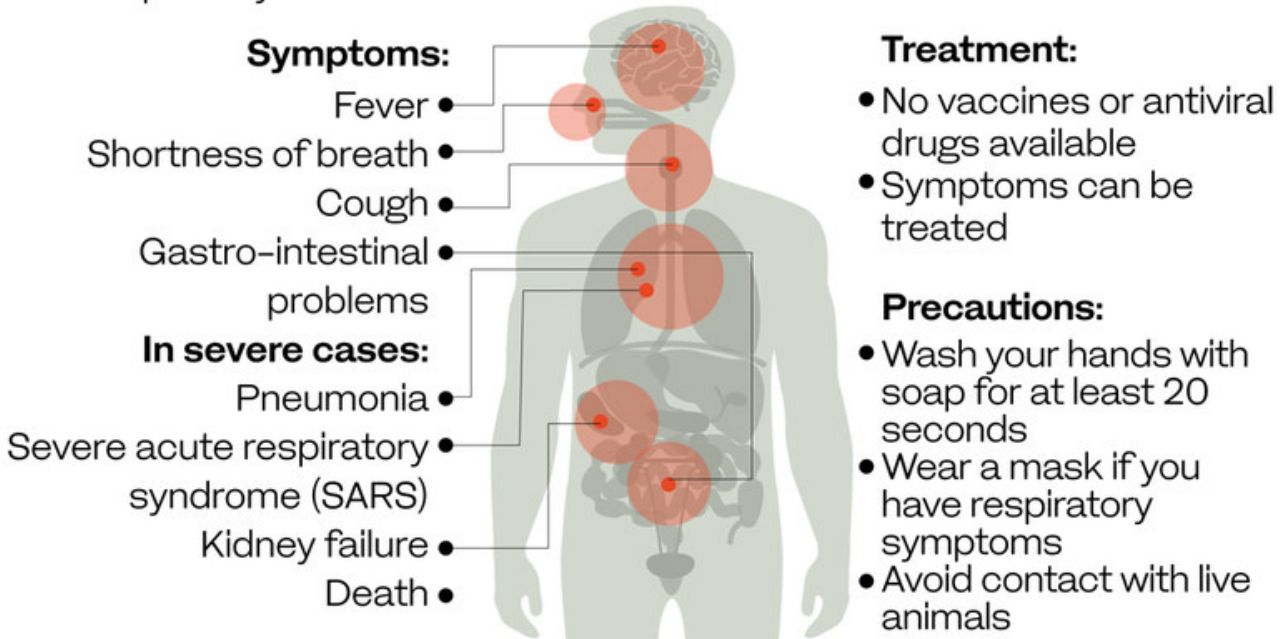
The health commissioner for Lagos, Africa's largest city with more than 20 million people, said an Italian citizen who entered Nigeria on Tuesday from Milan on a business trip fell ill the next day. Commissioner Akin Abayomi said the man was clinically stable with no serious symptoms.

Abayomi said officials were working to identify all of the man's contacts since he arrived in Nigeria. Lagos state early this month advised people arriving from virus-affected areas to observe 14 days of self-quarantine while monitoring for any symptoms. Nigerian health officials have been strengthening measures to ensure that any outbreak in Lagos is contained quickly, Abayomi said in a statement.

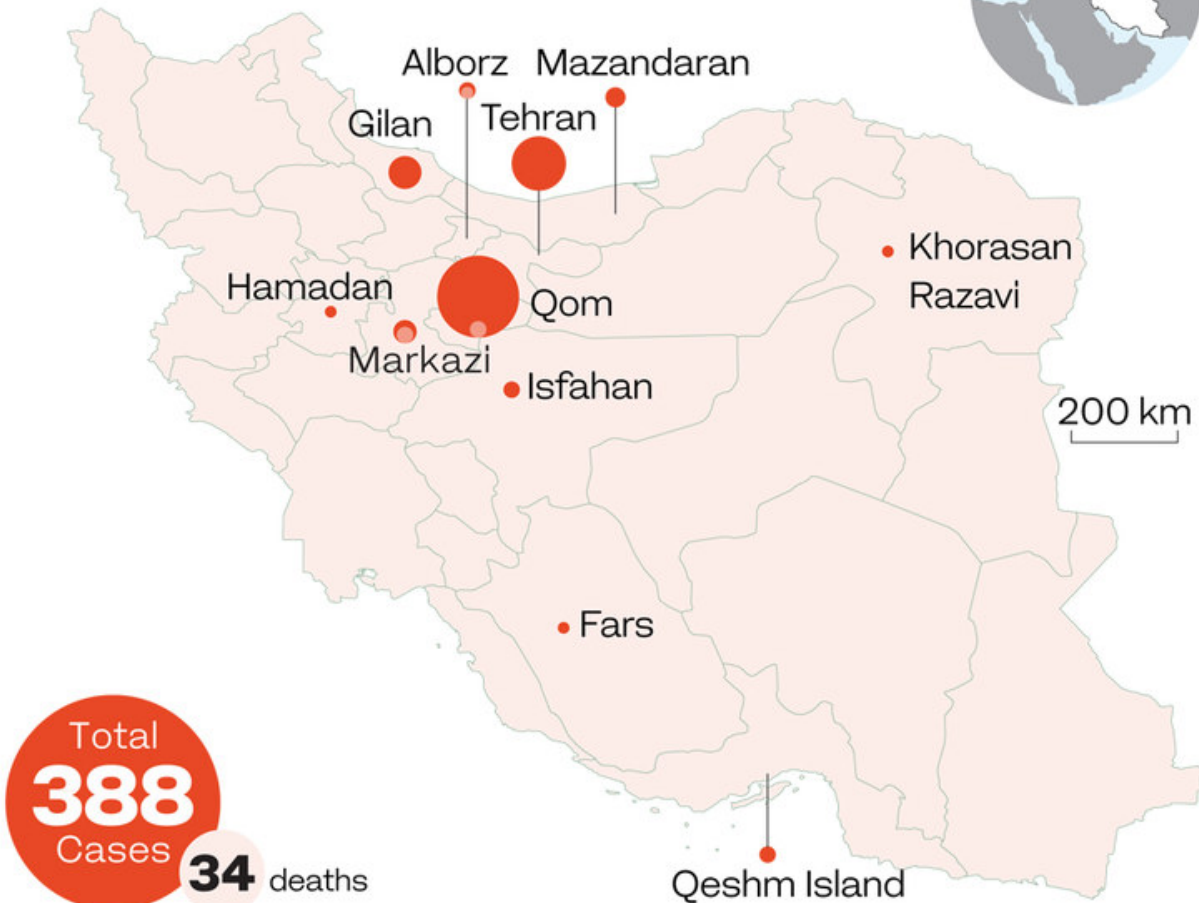
He urged Lagos residents to take measures such as keeping their distance from people who are coughing and washing their hands regularly.

WHAT IS THE CORONAVIRUS?

The 2019 Novel Coronavirus (2019-nCoV) is a member of the coronaviruses family, which originates from animals and typically affects the respiratory tract



IRAN: CORONAVIRUS OUTBREAK



Source: AFP and other agencies

Cases of the virus were confirmed in Egypt and Algeria in north Africa in recent days. Until then, some global health experts had expressed surprise that no cases had been reported in Africa.

It was concerns about the virus spreading to countries with weaker health systems that led the World Health Organization to declare the outbreak a global health emergency.

Nigeria is one of 13 African countries that WHO classified as high priority in this outbreak because of direct links to China or a high number of visitors from there.

On Thursday, word spread that one of Iran's many vice presidents, Masoumeh Ebtekar, had contracted the virus. Ebtekar, 59, is better known as "Sister Mary," the English-speaking spokeswoman for the students who seized the US Embassy in Tehran in 1979 and sparked the 444-day hostage crisis.

Ebtekar on Wednesday attended a Cabinet meeting chaired by Rouhani, 71. Other top officials, most in their late 50s and 60s, sat within several meters (feet) from her as well. Jahanpour, the Health Ministry spokesman, said the average age of those killed by the virus and the illness it brings is over 60.

State media has not said what measures those attending the meeting with Ebtekar were now taking. However, the concern about the virus' spread among Iran's elite has reached into Austria, where Foreign Minister Alexander Schallenberg tested negative for it after a recent trip to Tehran.

Worries persist over Shiite shrines remaining open in the country. Saudi Arabia on Thursday took the unprecedented decision to close off the holiest sites in Islam to foreign pilgrims over the coronavirus, disrupting travel for thousands of Muslims already headed to the kingdom and potentially affecting plans later this year for millions more ahead of the fasting month of Ramadan and the annual Hajj pilgrimage.

Some Iranian clerics also have offered advice with no basis in science, like Sheikh Abbas Tabrizian in Qom who told followers to give themselves a suppository of essential oils to ward off the virus.

Elsewhere, a major cycling race in the United Arab Emirates was canceled early Friday after two Italians tested positive for the new virus, setting off a quarantine that also ensnared four-time Tour de France winner Chris Froome of Britain. That pushed the overall number of confirmed cases to 21 in the UAE, a federation of seven sheikhdoms on the Arabian Peninsula.

In Cairo, authorities allowed a plane carrying 114 Chinese tourists into Egypt despite EgyptAir halting flights to China amid the outbreak. The tourists showed no symptoms of the virus and will be monitored during their weeklong vacation, said officials who spoke on condition of anonymity as they were not authorized to speak to journalists.

Lebanon has flights and barred citizens of China, Iran, Italy and South Korea from visiting the country, though Lebanese citizens and residents will be allowed back in. Qatar separately flew home its citizens from Iran and put them in a 14-day quarantine.

The Iran government's slow response and the unrelenting pressure Iranians face, especially as the country's rial currency this week hit its lowest value in a year against the US dollar, has seen many Iranians turn to dark humor. Jokes spread fast across social media, including one saying a government that previously cracked down on demonstrators now will lock up the

virus.

Then come the videos. Iraj Harirchi, who led Iran's coronavirus task force, sweated at the podium during a news conference and then later coughed all over the set of a state TV interview program, its female host looking down and away.

"I came from a cold place," Harirchi said, attempting to joke before bringing the crook of his arm to his face. "I made a mistake. I should cover my mouth like this."

Soon afterward, Harirchi acknowledged testing positive for the virus.



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[Yemenis should not be punished for Houthi wrongdoings, say officials](#)

Author:

Sat, 2020-02-29 01:32

AL-MUKALLA: Needy Yemenis should not be punished for Houthi actions targeting humanitarian operations in the war-torn country and the UN should divert its activities to government-controlled areas, officials said.

Yemen's Minister of Human Rights Mohammed Asker said international aid organizations had a duty to make sure that help reached those who needed it.

"The (international) organizations have a legal and moral responsibility when they request support for the needy in Yemen, to make sure that the donors' money does not go to buying bullets that kill Yemeni children," the minister told Arab News, adding that humanitarian operations inside Houthi-controlled areas had become a breeding ground for corruption due to a lack of transparency and accountability. "This is the net result of dealing with parties outside the framework of the state."

His warning came as the UN threatened to reduce its operations in northern Yemen due to Houthi obstruction. USAID said it would suspend aid to Houthi-controlled areas if the militants did not leave aid workers alone.

Yemeni officials said a suspension or reduction of aid in northern Yemen would aggravate the humanitarian crisis, and that civilians would pay the price.

Jamal Balfakeh, the general coordinator of Yemen's Higher Relief, an Aden-based government body responsible for handling humanitarian activities, said the international community should punish Houthis by relocating offices to Aden and dispatching aid through government-controlled areas.

HIGHLIGHT

Yemen's warning came as the UN threatened to reduce its operations in northern Yemen due to Houthi obstruction.

"The UN should punish the real perpetrators not civilians," he told Arab News, "and the greatest punishment is moving their operations to government-controlled areas. The UN can bring in aid through 22 sea and land corridors." He said that reports about the Houthi mishandling of aid and the militant group's obstruction vindicated the government's demand for the UN to investigate corruption.

"We have been warning the international community about the Houthi looting of aid since the first six months of the war," Balfakeh added. "We have provided them with detailed reports about the scale of the Houthi plundering of aid and told them that Houthis divert aid to their fighters." Yemen's ambassador to the US, Ahmed bin Mubarak, said that UN officials used to complain in private about Houthi pressure.

"UN officials used to complain that Houthis attacked and blackmailed their workers," he said. "But they could not confront the Houthis in public as they might disrupt aid."

He said the government was pleased that UN and media reports reflected concerns about the flow of arms from Iran and the Houthi looting of humanitarian aid.



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Saudi-led coalition tightens the screws on Houthi smuggling routes
US to stop aid in Yemen's Houthi areas if militants don't budge

[A homegrown UAE brand bets on date's heritage appeal](#)

Fri, 2020-02-28 23:17

DUBAI: When you can answer the classic business question about a unique selling proposition (USP) in six different ways, you likely have a successful product on your hands.

Thankfully, when you are dealing with dates, unusual product features are not a problem.

There are more than 3,000 date varieties around the world, but Emirati brand The Date Room is approaching the sticky business of breaking into an established market with just half a dozen local cultivars.

From the buttery, caramel notes of the golden Kholas date to the lower-carbohydrate Razaiz type, their flavors offer a change from the more commonly

available Medjool and Deglet Noor varieties.

Being locally sourced from about 20 farms in the Al-Ain oasis area of Abu Dhabi, they are also introducing UAE residents to the nation's heritage.

"Emirati dates are unique because they're generally much richer in taste and texture than others on the market – although they can be smaller in size," said Tony N. Al-Saiegh, executive director of The Date Room.

The Date Room launched with two luxury boutiques in the UAE last November after founder Ahmed Mohamed bin Salem spotted a gap for local fruit in a market dominated by produce from Saudi farms.

While official market share by origin data is not available, Saudi dates may control close to 90 percent of the UAE's retail market.

Yet, with an annual production of 755,000 tons, Saudi Arabia trails Egypt, Iran and Algeria, all of which produce in excess of a million tons each year, according to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization.

By contrast, UAE farms grow about 475,000 tons, a significant percentage of which is exported.

Dates are among the world's oldest cultivated crops. The palm is native to the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia, with origins that go back more than 5,000 years to what is modern-day Iraq.

The appeal of dates has grown considerably in recent years. Their high fiber and mineral profile have led to their classification as a superfood, they have been used for their high natural sugar content in healthy natural alternatives to processed candy bars.

"The Date Room's main initial motive was the fact that our own farms produce a superior quality of date in every way," Al-Saiegh said.

"Our families have been enjoying these dates with every meal and occasion for generations, so why not introduce it to the market in a way that makes them available to everyone but also promotes the unique culture of the UAE?"

The company's annual production runs to about 160 tons.

For now, distribution is restricted to the UAE, but Al-Saiegh says his team is in talks with distributors in India and Indonesia.

With farmers everywhere agonizing over the impact of climate change, what are the challenges facing date farmers, accustomed as their crops are to heat and aridity?

Scientists expect 2019 to be the second-hottest year on record after 2016, and they forecast that by 2070, today's major producers will suffer from a markedly unsuitable climate.

Despite palm trees being able to tolerate the heat for hundreds of years, Al-

Saiegh says his farms are already feeling the impact.

“As the weather gets hotter and the summers get longer, it’s drying out farms and (arable) land. This means more water is required because a lack of water affects the size and texture of the fruit,” he explains.

While the full impact of those changes is some years away, the Abu Dhabi government has focused on conserving the UNESCO World Heritage oasis where the UAE’s dates are grown.

On the other hand, given the way technology has transformed the local agricultural sector with solutions such as vertical, indoor and soilless farms, Al-Saiegh may soon be able to add another distinguishing feature to The Date Room’s USP.

• This report is being published by Arab News as a partner of the Middle East Exchange, which was launched by the Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Global Initiatives and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to reflect the vision of the UAE prime minister and ruler of Dubai to explore the possibility of changing the status of the Arab region.



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A Sinai desert community in Egypt leads the way in agritourism Jeddah travel and tourism exhibition witnesses increase in diversity and activity

[A Sinai desert community in Egypt leads the way in agritourism](#)

Fri, 2020-02-28 23:17

CAIRO: "Community is everything, surround yourself with beautiful souls and watch what happens. So much love, I feel it bubbling out of my chest," writes Madison Cooper.

The experienced yoga instructor and assistant manager at The Kings Arms pub and music venue in Salford, UK, said this when describing her experience in the Habiba village, a remote beach community in the middle of Egypt's South Sinai desert.

It was this feeling of peace and tranquility that brought Cairo-born Maged El-Said and his Italian wife Lorena to the Egyptian port city of Nuweiba to settle and eventually start the Habiba community in 1994.

The community is a village that hosts an eco-friendly beach lodge, an organic farm, the Sinai Palm Date foundation and a learning center partnered with universities and organizations around the globe to promote a new form of educational tourism by hosting professional certification courses in permaculture and agriculture ecosystems.

More than 90 percent of Egypt's land is covered by deserts, Sinai being part of the Eastern desert that occupies more than 20 percent of the country's surface area, with very few populated villages and cities along the Red Sea coastal strip.

"I am sure there is enormous potential to invest in our huge deserts. The hidden value is in the people if we learn from each other the best way of integrating management of resources," El-Said said.

This, however, is easier said than done: El-Said, who is now in his sixties, spent almost 20 years taking "agritourism" from a concept to a meaningful business.

He succeeded in 2009, when tourists started coming to volunteer at the organic farm merely to enjoy the experience of isolated serene living.

Before that, El-Said spent several years doing a series of seminars and workshops and inviting local and international experts in organic farming to

discuss the agritourism model.

His first introduction to the field was in Italy, where he earned his bachelor's degree in Italian language and literature in the 1970s.

Italian agritourism gained traction around the time when the agricultural business became less profitable.

Farmers in Italy were giving up, transforming their farms and farmhouses into vacation homes where tourists could stay and experience farming.

"People come to enjoy the beautiful nature and the serene surroundings, eat clean food and leave with fresh ideas and a new perspective on life," said El-Said when explaining the concept of agritourism.

While the idea is widespread in the US and many European countries, it remains nascent in MENA. Sporadic trials around the region are currently under way, including a licensing program launched by the Saudi Commission for Tourism and Antiquities for farms willing to explore the concept and offer agritourism services.

Expanding the scope of its target community, the Habiba learning center has been working toward hosting a series of certificate program.

Among them are an internationally recognized Permaculture Design Certificate course that provides an introduction to sustainable living systems for a wide variety of landscapes and climates.

The move is intended to attract a more professional international audience and establish a new breed of educational tourism. El-Said has an ambitious plan for the future, hoping he can establish a desert research hub within his community and start replicating the model in other Egyptian resort cities by the year 2025.

"It is challenging but beautifully rewarding; people are resistant to change, but when they see a working model, it becomes easy for them to follow," he said.

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A homegrown UAE brand bets on date's heritage appeal Jeddah travel and tourism exhibition witnesses increase in diversity and activity

[Protests hinder Yemen's efforts to combat coronavirus](#)

Author:

Fri, 2020-02-28 03:00

AL-MUKALLA: As workers in Yemen's major port Aden began preparing a coronavirus quarantine facility at Al-Sadaqa Hospital, rumors swirled around the city claiming that if patients were locked inside the hospital, the disease would quickly spread through neighboring areas.

Amid complaints about the city's poor health facilities, hospital staff and fearful residents began protesting. People living nearby besieged the hospital, while health workers inside staged a sit-in, refusing to work unless the Health Ministry canceled plans to build the isolation room.

"They threatened to kill me," Dr. Wafaa Dahbali, Al-Sadaqa Hospital manager, told Arab News.

The hospital's administration was forced to ask the Health Ministry to move the facility to another location, she said.

"Now we cannot even bring in basic protective items such as masks or gloves since workers will think we still plan to build the quarantine room," she added.

Yemen, which is gripped by a civil war that has killed thousands of people since late 2014, has intensified efforts to counter coronavirus. But due to crumbling health services, lack of awareness among people and the influx of hundreds of African migrants via the southern coastline, health officials fear the virus could spread undetected across the country.

Yemen's Ministry of Health in Aden on Wednesday said that Yemen is free of the disease and all Yemenis returning from China had tested negative. Health Minister Nasir Baoum opened a quarantine center at Seiyun Airport in the southeastern province of Hadramout on Sunday, and said that he had ordered all sea, land and air entry points to ramp up detection measures.

Financial constraints

Health officials across Yemen told Arab News this week that health facilities are working at full capacity to cope with the influx of war casualties, and cases of seasonal diseases such as cholera, dengue fever and H1N1.

The appearance of coronavirus in Yemen would increase the burden on the country's crumbling and cash-strapped health facilities, they said.

Ibn Sina Hospital in Al-Mukalla provides health services to patients from the three southern provinces of Hadramout, Shabwa and Mahra in addition to treating victims of the conflict in Abyan and Jawf.

Recently the Health Ministry decided to build a quarantine center at the hospital. Lacking sufficient space, a three-room kitchen was turned into an isolation facility.

However, Dr. Alabed Bamousa, the hospital's director, told Arab News that the facility could not afford to furnish the unit with medical equipment and staff lacked proper know-how.

"We have nothing at the moment. We asked the ministry for the names of health workers who would be trained by the World Health Organization on dealing with coronavirus patients," Bamousa said.

He said that workers are not being encouraged to wear masks and gloves in order to avoid triggering panic.

"My viewpoint is that we shut up till we are ready," Bamousa said.

Health officials at Al-Mukalla, one of Yemen's busiest ports, have asked sailors to complete declarations showing their movements before docking.

Riyadh Al-Jariri, head of the Health Ministry's Hadramout office, said that teams of six health workers in each district in the province are visiting Yemenis who have returned from China.

In the streets, people say that they get information about the virus from social media rather than official channels or local media outlets.

Hassan, a shopkeeper, said that he learned about symptoms of coronavirus and protection measures from WhatsApp.

"I know that the virus targets the lung and causes fever. We are advised to wash hands and wear marks," he said.



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US to stop aid in Yemen's Houthi areas if militants don't budge
Yemen envoy to US says Houthi escalation spoils peace hopes