

Iran tightens Covid curbs as cases, deaths surge

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Sat, 2021-08-14 18:07

TEHRAN: Iran on Saturday announced new curbs to combat the spread of Covid-19 as deaths and infections surge and as the country tries to speed up its vaccination campaign.

The Islamic republic is struggling to contain what officials have called a "fifth wave" of the virus caused by the highly infectious Delta variant. Hit by the Middle East's deadliest outbreak, Iran has officially recorded more than 97,000 deaths and over 4.38 million infections, with numbers breaking daily records several times this month.

Health authorities acknowledge that the official figures underestimate the country's real toll.

Iran's national coronavirus taskforce announced Saturday that government offices, banks and non-essential businesses must close their doors countrywide from Monday until the end of next Saturday.

A ban on car travel between provinces will be in force from noon on Sunday (0730 GMT) until August 27, taskforce spokesman Alireza Raisi told IRNA state news agency.

The new measures coincide with two Shiite religious commemorations set for next week, though authorities said the measures would not impact ceremonies held in the open air.

Iran has avoided imposing a full lockdown on its 83-million-strong population, instead resorting to piecemeal measures such as temporary travel bans and business closures.

Authorities have recently tried to speed up the inoculation campaign amid criticism that it began too late and as the country's exhausted health system struggles to cope with rising case numbers.

A few thousand Iranians lined up on Saturday at a vaccination center at Tehran's sprawling Iran Mall, AFP journalists said.

The government announced recently that teachers, transport workers and Iranians aged over 53 were eligible to receive the jab.

"The vaccination pace is accelerating every day, thank God," said Bahare Karimi, a health ministry representative at the vaccination center, adding that health workers were "very tired now."

She told AFP that the center was currently distributing Sinopharm vaccines, but that the type of jab being administered might differ from day to day. President Ebrahim Raisi said that Iran needed an additional 60 million vaccine doses to "control the unfavorable coronavirus situation," according to the government's website.

Raisi told a Covid taskforce meeting on Saturday that 30 million doses would be imported and made available "in a short time."



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Iran will impose 6-day 'general lockdown' over coronavirusIran's Khamenei says halting Covid 'urgent' priority

[Russia says all 8 die in water-bomber plane crash in Turkey](#)

Author:

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Sat, 2021-08-14 17:37

Moscow: Russia on Saturday said all eight people onboard a Russian water-dropping plane died when it crashed in Turkey during a firefighting mission. Moscow's defense ministry said five Russian servicemen and three Turkish nationals were killed in the crash, news agencies reported. The Russian defense ministry earlier said the Be-200 plane went down around

1330 GMT with eight crew onboard.

The plane crashed near the southern Turkish city of Adana, it said.

Russian consular representatives and a defense ministry commission were on their way to the crash site.

In July, Russia said it would send Be-200 planes to Turkey to help it fight spreading wildfires.

Turkish state news agency Anadolu reported that rescuers had rushed to the scene with television footage showing a column of smoke rising from a mountainous zone.



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New Russian war plane has Mideast orders in sights2 airplanes collide at Dubai's main airport; no injuries

Tunisian president receives official US delegation

Fri, 2021-08-13 22:50

TUNIS: Tunisian President Kais Saied on Friday received an official US delegation headed by deputy national security adviser Jonathan Finer, who carried a written message from President Joe Biden, the Tunisian presidency posted on Facebook.

During the meeting Saied said the measures he had taken – dismissing the prime minister, freezing Parliament and assuming executive authority – were within the framework of implementing the constitution and responding to a popular will in light of the political, economic and social crises, and rampant corruption and bribery.



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Lebanon's state facilities to suspend operations as fuel crisis worsens

Fri, 2021-08-13 21:58

BEIRUT: Many vital state facilities in Lebanon have warned of a full suspension of operations within 48 hours as a nationwide diesel fuel crisis has hit a catastrophic level.

There were long queues at gas stations, bakeries, and pharmacies across the country on Friday as people slept on the roofs of their buildings amid power cuts and the absence of diesel to run private generators.

One state facility that barely avoided a shutdown was the Beirut-Rafic Hariri International Airport, which benefited from a last-second injection of diesel to help keep the lights on.

"The petroleum importing companies were unable to deliver gasoline and diesel to the stations because they did not know how to price anything," said Georges Fayyad, who heads the Association of Petroleum Importing Companies in Lebanon.

"The central bank told them that it will adopt the black market exchange rate (20,000 Lebanese pounds to the dollar) while the Ministry of Energy is still adopting the rate of 3,900 Lebanese pounds to the dollar."

The recent fuel shortage is among one of the lowest points of a two-year financial crisis that has seen the Lebanese pound lose 90 percent of its value and driven more than half the population into poverty.

"The tug of war between the ruling authority and the central bank puts the people, the owners of the stations, and the entire fuel sector in a bind," said George Brax, a member of the Gas Station Owners' Syndicate.

"The citizens are suffering the consequences."

The state-run telecommunications company Ogero announced that "due to the lack of fuel," services have been suspended in the Akkar region in northern Lebanon.

Caretaker Minister of Communications Talal Hawat denied rumors about the ministry planning to permanently cut off Internet service in the country between 12 a.m. and 7 a.m. next month.

Youth groups in the south and north intercepted diesel tanks and confiscated the cargo while a fistfight over fuel at a gas station in Damour escalated into a shooting.

Nasser Srour, secretary of the syndicate of bakery owners in Beirut and Mount

Lebanon, said he informed the economy minister that “dozens of bakeries have closed their doors” due to the fuel crisis.

Farid Zeinoun, head of the Union of Workers and Distributors in the Gas Sector, announced that the gas reserves “are sufficient for five days,” and called on the central bank “to allow the gas tanker that has been anchored at sea for 20 days to enter.”

The crisis has also sparked an exodus of citizens as long queues have emerged at Lebanese General Security centers across the country as 4,000 to 5,000 passport requests are being submitted every day.

“We get thousands of young Lebanese who are requesting passports to apply for immigration,” a security source said.

The Directorate of General Security described it as an “unprecedented” rush for passports.

The demand to expedite the formation of a new government was the focus of Friday’s meeting between President Michel Aoun and Maronite Patriarch Mar Bechara Boutros Al-Rahi.

The cleric demanded a government that “is made up of competent people who rise above all parties; this government needs to be ready to face difficulties and implement structural reforms in various sectors.”

On Thursday, Central Bank Gov. Riad Salameh said he will not dip into the mandatory reserve to subsidize fuel unless parliament legislates this matter. As a result, petroleum importing companies decided not to distribute fuel to stations until an agreement over the pricing is reached.

The bank’s decision puzzled the ruling authority, which had been trying to pressure Salameh to continue subsidizing fuel until ration cards for the needy were issued.

“The ration cards will be distributed to 500,000 families, and about \$17 will be allocated for each family member,” a source close to caretaker Minister of Finance Ghazi Wazni told Arab News.

Lebanon will benefit from \$300 million from the World Bank, according to the source, and it is expected to also benefit from \$860 million in September coming from the International Monetary Fund to finance the ration cards. There is another World Bank program that can support 150,000 poor families.

“But it all depends on forming a government,” the source said. “We are expecting solutions by September, but not before.”



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Lebanon's prime minister rejects president's call for fuel crisis meeting
Lebanon's central bank to offer credit lines for fuel imports at market price, ends subsidy

[Israel to relax Gaza curbs amid security calm](#)

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Fri, 2021-08-13 20:03

JERUSALEM: Israel is to authorize the entry of Palestinian traders and goods from Gaza for the first time in more than a year following an improvement in the security situation, officials said Friday.

"In light of the preservation of security stability" in the area, "1,000 merchants and 350 senior Gazan businesspeople" will be allowed into Israel from Sunday, said the Israeli military body responsible for civil affairs in the occupied Palestinian territories, COGAT.

Also, "exports from the Gaza Strip into Israel will recommence through the Kerem Shalom crossing, and imports from Israel into the Gaza Strip will be expanded – including components belonging to the transport and communications sector," COGAT said in statement.

"Equipment and goods will be allowed in for the Gaza Strip's humanitarian infrastructure, such as water and sewage," it said.

COGAT cautioned that the relaxation was "conditional on the continued preservation of the region's security."

Entry permits will be issued "only to those vaccinated against or recovered from Covid-19," it said.

A COGAT spokeswoman told AFP this would be the first time Israel was allowing Gaza traders in since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic over a year ago.

In late July, Israel expanded the fishing zone off Gaza and resumed imports into the territory for international aid projects.

A fragile truce has largely held following 11 days of deadly conflict between Israel and Hamas in May, although sporadic incendiary balloon launches from Gaza have triggered Israeli retaliatory fire.



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