

Lebanon launches 'vaccine marathon' to fight Astrazeneca rumors

Tue, 2021-05-25 21:18

BEIRUT: Lebanon's Ministry of Health will launch a "vaccination marathon" next Saturday for people aged over 30 to receive Astrazeneca jabs in health centers across the country.

In an effort to promote mass vaccination, Lebanese authorities will declare the province where the largest number of people receive vaccinations as the winner of the marathon.

A significant number of Lebanese citizens have refused to receive vaccines produced by AstraZeneca, despite receiving text messages outlining appointment dates.

It comes after viral news circulated that purported to show dangerous side effects of the vaccine, including risks of stroke and death.

Reports said that a man died three days after receiving an AstraZeneca vaccine. However, Hamad Hasan, Lebanon's health minister, said that an investigation into the case "is still underway."

Another eight other people were also reported dead after receiving the vaccine, but "whether their deaths were linked to the vaccine" is another question, Hasan added.

A health ministry study estimated that herd immunity reached 42 percent among Lebanese citizens and about 47 percent among Palestinian refugees in the country.

"This means that the herd immunity rate is rising to 50 percent, and is expected to reach about 75 percent in August, with large quantities of vaccines expected to be delivered," said Hasan.

Lebanon is due to receive 2 million vaccines in June and July.

Dr. Abdul Rahman Bizri, head of the National Committee for the Administration of the Coronavirus Vaccine, told Arab News: "A high percentage of those registered to take the vaccine refrained from taking AstraZeneca. As part of our initiatives to encourage people to get vaccinated, we organized an open day enabling citizens to receive the vaccine without booking an appointment."

Bizri said that a new Lebanese study showed an improved presence of antibodies among the population, but that total immunity had not yet been achieved. "The result should not make us feel reassured, as we need to continue to abide by the precautionary measures," he added.

He said: "Lebanon is buying vaccines from the state treasury and will give priority to Pfizer vaccines."

Daily COVID-19 case numbers in Lebanon have fallen significantly, with just 150 cases and seven deaths recorded on Monday.

However, Hasan warned against “gradually slipping away from preventive measures, which will make Lebanon return to the danger zone and the July 2020 scenario, when Lebanon began to lose control.”

During the summer season, Lebanon is expected to receive a surge of holidaymakers. Hasan warned tourists to avoid repeating the mistakes that could push Lebanon into a renewed wave of outbreaks.

According to government data, the total number of people who have registered to receive a vaccine reached 433,889, including 113,179 health workers. The vast majority of people were from the Beirut and Mount Lebanon regions, while the number of people registering from the Bekaa, North and South provinces was much lower.

More than 500,000 registered people have received a Pfizer vaccine, while only 85,880 received AstraZeneca’s jab. A further 54,105 people received Russia’s Sputnik V vaccine, and 6,093 Lebanese were inoculated with China’s Sinopharm.

From February 2020 to Monday, Lebanon has registered 538,668 COVID-19 cases.

“Positive epidemiological indicators continue to improve, with tests currently positive at 4 percent compared with the previous 22 percent, and the mortality rate has fallen from nine per 1,000 to nine per 3,000,” Hasan said.

This week, Lebanon’s health ministry began vaccinating public sector employees. About 900,000 people have registered on the country’s e-platform, but are yet to receive a vaccination. The ministry expects that all the people registered on the platform will receive a first Pfizer dose by the end of June.

The private sector has helped speed up the inoculation process by vaccinating employees of companies, institutions, factories and banks, with political parties also vaccinating supporters.



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UN tribunal for Lebanon runs out of funds as Beirut's crisis spills over
Debt restructuring could cost up to 134 percent of Lebanon's GDP, S&P warns

[GCC key to peace in Yemen: Kuwaiti academic](#)

Tue, 2021-05-25 21:54

LONDON: The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) is key to peace in Yemen and could fend off security threats in the war-torn country, a Kuwaiti academic told a distinguished panel at an event on Tuesday hosted by UK think tank Chatham House.

An important step in achieving that is making Yemen a GCC member, Bader Al-Saif said at the event, titled "The GCC at 40: Prospects for the Future" and attended by Arab News.

"It's about time that Yemen is once and for all seriously considered as an active full member of the GCC. There are synergies that will bring benefits to both sides of the formula," added Al-Saif, assistant professor of history at Kuwait University.

Referring to a 2011 Saudi-led proposal to transform the bloc into a Gulf Union to counter Iranian influence in the region, he said: “We could bring a permanent resolution to Yemen if we can tie that track with the track of acceding Yemen into the GCC.”

At the event, Al-Saif and other analysts detailed avenues through which the GCC could expand its geopolitical powers.

He said if the bloc wants to push forward to new heights, it needs to have a stamp in the global arena.

“There’s clearly that appetite from Qatar, the UAE and Saudi Arabia ... Hopefully we can go back to that collective action,” Al-Saif added. “I think when push comes to shove, they’ll come together and advance certain initiatives.”



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Israel defense ministry wants Gaza aid to bypass Hamas

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Mon, 2021-05-24 21:50

JERUSALEM: An Israeli defense official said Monday aid to rebuild the conflict-battered Gaza Strip must bypass its Islamist rulers Hamas, and instead flow through an international "mechanism" to reach people directly. Israel has enforced a blockade on impoverished Gaza since 2007, when Hamas seized control of the crowded enclave.

Israel argues the measures are necessary to isolate Hamas, considered a terrorist organization by most Western countries.

The official – who was not authorized to speak publicly on the matter – said the aid must be managed to rehabilitate Gaza "without posing a threat to Israel."

The official, who spoke a day before US Secretary of State Antony Blinken visits the region, said aid deliveries would have to involve the West Bank-based Palestinian Authority, which has worked with Hamas in the past to deliver donations to Gaza.

US President Joe Biden said in a statement that part of Blinken's trip would include working on "the coordinated international effort to ensure immediate assistance reaches Gaza in a way that benefits the people there and not Hamas."

Israel pounded Gaza for 11 days with air strikes and artillery, while Hamas fired more than 4,000 rockets from the enclave, before a cease-fire last Friday.

Israeli strikes ravaged Gaza's infrastructure, as well as made at least 6,000 people homeless, the UN's humanitarian agency says.

Up to 800,000 are without access to clean water in the coastal enclave.

Egypt has pledged \$500 million to support rebuilding, while the UN said it has released \$18.5 million for humanitarian aid in Gaza.



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Egyptian mediators hold talks to firm up Israel-Hamas truce
US Secretary of State Blinken off to Mideast to push peace talks after Gaza truce

[Belarus points to Hamas bomb threat in plane diversion, group rejects claim](#)

Mon, 2021-05-24 21:12

MOSCOW: Belarus said on Monday that a false bomb threat that prompted a passenger plane to be diverted to Minsk where authorities arrested a journalist on board, was written in the name of the Palestinian group Hamas. Authorities released what they said was a text of the bomb alert as officials sought to defuse a mounting international outcry over what Western capitals have denounced as an act of "state piracy."

Hamas spokesman Fawzi Barhoum denied his group had any knowledge or connection.

Minsk scrambled a warplane to escort a Ryanair flight on Sunday, flagging a bomb alert that proved false once the plane had made an unscheduled landing in Belarus where authorities arrested Roman Protasevich, a journalist critical of Belarusian leader Alexander Lukashenko.

Western governments are threatening new sanctions against the former Soviet republic led by authoritarian Lukashenko over the diversion of the flight from Greece to Lithuania as it flew through Belarusian air space.

In Minsk, the foreign ministry's spokesman said Belarus had acted in line with international regulations and a senior transport official read out what he said was the text of the bomb threat.

"We, the soldiers of Hamas, demand that Israel cease fire in the Gaza Strip. We demand that the European Union withdraw its support for Israel in this war," said the head of the transport ministry's aviation department.

"There is a bomb on that plane. If you do not comply with our demands, the bomb will explode over Vilnius on 23 May," he said.

Hamas spokesman Barhoum said the group "has nothing to do with that completely."

The Palestinian movement and Israel are in the fourth day of a cease-fire after 11 days of hostilities, the worst outbreak in fighting between Israel and Hamas in years.

"We don't resort to these methods, which could be the doing of some suspicious parties that aim to demonize Hamas and foil the state of world sympathy with our Palestinian people and their legitimate resistance," the Hamas spokesman said.

Igor Golub, head of the Belarusian air force, said that the Ryanair crew took the decision to divert to Minsk itself and that the fighter jet was sent to escort it only after it turned to fly toward the Belarusian capital.

The Belarusian foreign ministry spokesman said Minsk would guarantee full transparency in the case and would also be prepared to allow foreign experts to be involved in an investigation.



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Egyptian mediators hold talks to firm up Israel-Hamas truce
Key Palestine questions stay unresolved as Israel-Hamas fighting in Gaza ends

[Lebanese parties reject the return to 'militia behavior' amid anger over pro-Assad rallies](#)

Author:

Mon, 2021-05-24 21:11

BEIRUT: Lebanese political parties have reacted strongly to a Beirut demonstration on Sunday by the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP), with the speaker of the Lebanese parliament reiterating the need for a national

government on Monday.

Chants by SSNP members were “a return to the language of the civil war,” the parties said.

The demonstration, authorized by the Ministry of Interior, took place in light of a complex and deadly political stalemate.

It also came after four days of raising pictures of Syrian President Bashar Assad, with Syrian workers and refugees, who were cheering Assad, being attacked by some Lebanese citizens.

The SSNP demonstration came within the framework of the commemoration of the liberation of southern Lebanon from the Israeli occupation.

At the forefront of the celebrating parties was Hezbollah, whose supporters spread in the border areas.

Those groups waved Lebanese and Hezbollah flags, and drove their cars and motorbikes to smash an iron gate bearing an Israeli symbol before travelling to the town of Naqoura.

The speaker of the Lebanese parliament, Nabih Berri, warned on Monday that “creating crises on purpose, if it continues without a quick initiative to address them, will topple Lebanon.”

Berri called on “the loyalists and the opposition to feel the danger of the fateful stage.”

He urged political forces and NGOs “to liberate Lebanon from the complex of choosing personal interests over the interests of the homeland by some people, and recognize that our governmental problem is 100 percent internal.”

Berri said: “The only solution is to form a national government, without preconditions, with non-partisan competencies, no obstructing third for anyone, according to the French initiative, and its only program of action should be to restore the confidence of the Lebanese and the Arab brothers in Lebanon.”

Political activist Naufal Daou told Arab News that “what is happening in Lebanon is just smoke bombs to divert attention from the main problem, which is the Syrian and Iranian occupation of Lebanon.”

He clarified that “all that happened in recent days is an attempt to cover up the basis of the problem and to distract people.”

He added: “As long as we do not acknowledge the main problem, which is related to the wrong regional and international positioning of Lebanon, and as long as we remain as part of the Syrian-Iranian system, there are no solutions and no one is ready to help us.

“The international community is telling us to reform and fight corruption. This is your business.

“But when we say to the international community that we are occupied by Iran, the issue of Lebanon becomes the focus of foreign treatments.”

The SSNP demonstration soon evolved into a military parade without weapons.

Party members covered their faces with masks and wore black and khaki colors.

Video footage circulated on social media of groups participating in the demonstration shouting chants against the leader of the Lebanese Forces (LF), Samir Geagea, threatening to kill him in the same way former President Bashir Gemayel was killed in 1982.

The Judicial Council issued a death sentence against Habib Al-Shartouni, a member of the SSNP, for the murder of Gemayel.

The LF said in a statement that “the chant that was used at the demonstration was a clear admission of killing and an explicit call to kill.”

The LF announced that it would file a case before the competent authorities “against those responsible for the celebration.”

The leader of the Free Patriotic Movement, MP Gebran Bassil, joined the denouncers.

Bassil said that “every call to kill is reprehensible, and it is a return to the language of war that is rejected because fueling instincts undermines the principle of the state.”

Bassil added: “We reject the return to militia behavior, and there is no place to justify it. As for respecting the martyrs, especially the president of the republic, it is a duty, and we all have martyrs.”

The head of the LF’s foreign affairs department, Richard Kouyoumjian, warned that no one can bring back Syrian tutelage to Lebanon.

He called for “every displaced Syrian who has chanted in support of Assad to return to Syria because we cannot continue as a lawless country.”

The Future Movement MP Rola Al-Tabash denounced “the paramilitary parades in Beirut, the closure of roads and intimidation of citizens, insults and confessions of assassinations and threats to commit others.”

On Twitter, she asked: “What is the position of the judicial and security agencies regarding what happened? What is the position of the administration that raises the banner of sovereignty regarding replaying the scenes of war?”

MP Nadim Gemayel, the son of the former president, said: “Bashir, after 40 years, still terrifies them.”

The Progressive Socialist Party said that “civil peace and respect for its requirements is one of the most prominent pillars of the Taif Accord, which ended the civil war and laid the basis of national reconciliation that must be adhered to above all considerations, hoping that those concerned realize

the urgent necessity to achieve a government settlement before it is too late.”

The Lebanese “are experiencing unbearable daily oppression,” the party added.

The media office of Interior Minister Mohammed Fahmy referred to a split within the SSNP.

It said: “Some members of the party obtained a license from the ministry to hold a ceremonial gathering and pledged to abide by the conditions of the ministry. Others within the party objected to the request on the grounds that the license applicants do not represent the party.”

Fahmy’s office added that “the ministry does not interfere in disputes within parties.”



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