

Up in smoke: Coronavirus pandemic no match for Lebanon's hookah lovers

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Sat, 2020-06-20 21:26

BEIRUT: Lebanon's hookah fans are returning to bars and restaurants amid warnings that the smoky pastime carries even greater health risks because of the coronavirus.

A few days ago Tourism Minister Ramzi Msharrafieh allowed restaurants and coffee shops to serve hookah, although some cafes had started offering it weeks earlier to attract customers.

"Hookah alone is totally damaging to the health, and its damage is much higher now with the spread of the new coronavirus," chest and emergency specialist Dr. Wael Jaroush told Arab News. He was irritated by restaurant owners who claimed they were protecting their customers' health by throwing away leftovers but at the same time also offered them hookah. "As if smoking hookah alone does not pose a threat to people's health," Jaroush added. "The latest statistics in Lebanon have shown that 33 percent of girls between the ages of 16 and 18, and 42 percent of young boys of the same age range smoke hookah and this is a real disaster."

Tony Ramy, who is president of the Syndicate of Owners of Restaurants, Cafés, Night-Clubs & Pastries, said that a quarter of people went to restaurants and cafes to smoke hookah.

"Nothing can save restaurants and cafes from their financial crisis, but hookah will restore a certain atmosphere to restaurants that will procure added value for Lebanese cuisine," he told Arab News, referring to the months of economic turmoil and hardships the country has endured.

He said there were 2,500 cafes in Lebanon and that allowing them to serve hookah again might boost their business.

Msharrafieh, who is himself a doctor, stipulated that hookah must be served outdoors and warned people about the health risks of smoking and the damage it had on the respiratory system.

There are also conditions for pandemic-friendly hookah practices: Sterilizing the hookah, not using it twice during the day, checking the temperature of each employee serving the hookah on a regular basis, changing the water inside the hookah bottle before and after each use, using a disposable smoking tube, and maintaining the appropriate distance between the tables.

But the minister's decision angered universities, unions, and societies.

Dr. Charaf Abou Charaf, president of the Lebanese Order of Physicians, criticized Msharrafieh and insisted on implementing a law that forbids smoking in public places in Lebanon, whether outdoors or indoors, saying it had been neglected after it being implemented for a short period.

"Smoking, of all kinds, increases the risk of contracting the new coronavirus, especially when smoking hookah as it entails repeated touching of the face with one's hands, by partaking one hookah by many smokers, and by

neglecting social distancing, which increases the chances of transmitting the disease," he told Arab News.

Hookah extended the lifetime of microorganisms in it no matter how much it was cleaned and sterilized, he added, and smoking one hookah was equivalent to smoking 40 cigarettes.

"Smoking increases the risk of complications when a smoker contracts the new coronavirus, (they) are higher than the case of a non-smoker," he said.

"Smokers infected with the disease are three times higher than the number of non-smokers. Smokers have higher risks of death or needing breathing apparatus than non-smokers. And there are 40 percent of recorded infection cases in Lebanon who are smokers."

He said that smoking cost the state \$53 million a year and called on the government not to waste what had been accomplished in the fight against the coronavirus. Smoking would, he said, get Lebanon "back to square one" for the sake of "weak economic reasons, and for the benefit of a few at the expense of the Lebanese majority."

He also urged the government to take advantage of the current situation and to rid Lebanon "once and for all of the hookah pandemic."

It was no less dangerous than the coronavirus and the country's health system was going through a perilous stage, he warned. "Our hospitals are suffering from severe shortages, and it is not acceptable to allow a resurgence of the health problem."

Concerns about the reemergence of hookah come as the country returns to normality, and there are signs that people are ignoring preventive measures. Curfews have ended, traffic jams are at pre-lockdown level and people can be seen crowding in front of shops, banks, cafes, nurseries, and electronic game stores, which have all opened to receive customers even though the Ministry of Interior has not sanctioned this.

People are also going without face coverings, unless being instructed to wear them by private security staff at malls and businesses.

Lebanon's confirmed number of coronavirus cases has exceeded 1,500, and the first case was recorded on Feb. 21.



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Sat, 2020-06-20 17:11

CAIRO: Egypt is committed to using diplomacy to resolve a crisis with

Ethiopia over its construction of a giant hydroelectric dam on the Blue Nile, President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi said on Saturday, addressing stalled talks on the issue.

The talks were halted once again on Wednesday, this time only about a fortnight before the expected start-up of the \$4 billion Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, which is being built near Ethiopia's border with Sudan and is the centerpiece in its bid to become Africa's biggest power exporter. Cairo said on Friday it had called on the United Nations Security Council to intervene to restart the talks.

"When we moved to the Security Council... that was (because) we are always keen to take the diplomatic and political path until its end," El-Sisi said in a speech at an air force base.

"We need to move strongly toward concluding the negotiations and reach an agreement... and solutions that achieve the interest of all," he said.

Egypt, which is almost entirely dependent on the Nile for its fresh water supplies, is anxious to secure a legally binding deal that would guarantee minimum flows and a mechanism for resolving disputes before the dam starts operating.

The latest talks, which had started on June 9 over video conference, followed a previous round of negotiations in Washington, which ended without agreement in February.

On Saturday, El-Sisi recalled that in a speech he gave to the Ethiopian parliament five years ago he said that while Egypt respects Ethiopians' need for development they also should respect its needs for "life."



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Sat, 2020-06-20 18:25

LONDON: Canadian employees at a college in Qatar have been threatened with job losses if they leave the country over the summer, despite scorching heat and sky-high COVID-19 infection rates.

Employees at the College of the North Atlantic (CNA), a Canadian college contracted by Qatar to run a campus in Doha, have said they fear job losses or reprisal from the Qatari government if they leave the country over the summer.

“Living in a country that has, for weeks, had the highest per-capita number of positive COVID-19 cases in the world is extremely stressful, and several CNA-Q (CNA Qatar) employees are anxious to leave for summer,” one employee said.

The college employs 650 staff, the majority of whom are Canadian. Foreign staff usually return home for the summer to avoid the heat, a factor that this year has been compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic.

“People just want to return to Canada for the summer to get away from this pressure cooker for a few weeks and be with family,” another staff member said.

A spokesperson for the college said: “CNA-Q employees who decide to leave Qatar and do not return to work at CNA-Q when required may have their employment agreement terminated.”

The employees who spoke with CBC News all said they were initially discouraged from leaving the country when the pandemic began, but were not threatened with any measures against them.

In addition to the obstacles employees face trying to go home for the summer, they have also been told that they will be forced to return to classrooms when teaching resumes in September. This decision has apparently bewildered many college staff.

One staff member said: “CNA employees have been teaching online from mid-March and it’s working. Many employees can’t understand why they can’t continue to do this from the safety (of) their home country.”

With more than 85,000 COVID-19 infections among a population of just 2.8 million, Qatar has the highest per-capita infection rate in the world.

The country is in the process of reopening public spaces despite recording over 1,000 new infections per day.



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Arab world

Sat, 2020-06-20 18:11

LONDON: Turkey sees in the Arab world a strategic space for its historical dreams, UAE Minister for State of Foreign Affairs Anwar Gargash tweeted on Saturday.

“Amr Moussa’s statement about the Turkish strategic threat to the Arab world did not come from a vacuum, but rather diagnoses of Ankara’s policy towards its Arab surroundings,” Gargash tweeted.

“(It is) an important statement in its timing that highlights the Turkish expansionist strategy and its exploitation of the state of weakness experienced by the Arab regional system,” he added.

In another tweet, Gargash said: “Over the years, relations of neighborliness and respect have strengthened economic and political ties between Turkey and its Arab region.”

“(They have been) replaced by a program of expansion and leadership that sees the Arab world as a strategic space for (Turkish) historical dreams, a policy far from wisdom that will implicate Ankara and its interests in the coming stages.”

Gargash’s tweets come soon after Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi ordered his army to be ready to carry out any mission inside or outside the country to protect its national security amid tensions over Turkey’s intervention in neighboring Libya.

Turkey supports the internationally recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli, which, with Turkish support, has reversed a 14-month assault on the capital by Khalifa Haftar’s eastern-based Libyan National Army (LNA).



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Sat, 2020-06-20 12:40

TEHRAN: Iranian health authorities Saturday announced more than 100 new deaths from coronavirus and another 2,000 cases of the illness, as the country's fight against the pandemic entered its fifth month.

Iran reported its first coronavirus cases on February 19, and it has since struggled to contain the outbreak, the worst in the Middle East.

The Islamic republic's official figures have shown an upward trajectory in new cases of infection since early May. Health ministry spokeswoman Sima Sadat Lari said there were 115 fatalities in the past 24 hours, bringing the country's death toll to 9,507. There were also 2,322 new cases of infection, with the total number of confirmed cases now at 202,584, she added. There has been skepticism at home and abroad about Iran's official figures, with concerns the real toll could be much higher. President Hassan Rouhani on Saturday warned that stress created by the disease could leave people "depressed." He called on experts and artists to prepare Iranians mentally "to fight the virus for a long time." "Without perseverance and continuity, we risk losing all our gains," he said during a meeting of a taskforce set up to fight the pandemic. Rouhani also confirmed his government's decision to allow provinces to make their own decisions on restrictive measures, implemented with "the president's approval." Seven of Iran's 31 provinces – Khuzestan, Khorasan Razavi, Kermanshah, West and East Azerbaijan, Golestan and Kurdistan – are currently "red," the highest level on its color-coded risk scale, Lari said.



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