

Qatar coronavirus infections top 30,000

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DUBAI: Qatar's number of novel coronavirus infections topped 30,000 on Saturday, according to a Reuters tally based on official figures. The health ministry reported 1,547 new cases on Saturday, according to the state-run Qatar News Agency. That took the cumulative total to 30,972, according to the Reuters count.



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Qatar makes face masks mandatory on threat of jail, fines Qatar's migrant workers 'beg for food' amid coronavirus outbreak

EU to push Israel to ditch West Bank annexation plans

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Fri, 2020-05-15 17:28

BRUSSELS: The EU will make a diplomatic push to try to stop Israel going ahead with a plan to annex parts of the occupied West Bank, the bloc's foreign policy chief said Friday.

Josep Borrell said the bloc would use "all our diplomatic capacities" to try to dissuade Israel's incoming government from going ahead with the move, approved under US President Donald Trump's Middle East peace plan.

While EU countries are alarmed at the prospect of annexations, which they say would violate international law and harm the chances of peace, they are divided about what action to take against Israel.

"What everybody agreed is we have to increase our efforts and our reachout to all relevant actors in the Middle East...," Borrell said after the talks.

"We are ready to do that and we will do that in the next days using all our diplomatic capacities in order to prevent any kind of unilateral action."

The push will involve talking to Washington and Arab countries as well as Israel and the Palestinians, Borrell said.

Israel's long-awaited unity government will be sworn in on Sunday – after three inconclusive elections in less than a year and a power-sharing agreement between Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and former rival Benny Gantz.

Some EU countries have pushed for the bloc to take a hard line against Israel, with Luxembourg's veteran foreign minister Jean Asselborn in particular calling for the recognition of a Palestinian state.

But others have urged caution and dialogue with Israel, which is seen as an important EU partner in the Middle East.

"We are in a dialogue with the responsible parties, including in Israel," German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas said.

"We have always made it clear... that we are committed to the goal of a negotiated two-state solution, and that we believe that annexations are not compatible with international law."



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[Jordan warns Israel of 'massive conflict' over annexation](#)

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By LORNE COOK | AP

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Fri, 2020-05-15 16:56

BRUSSELS: Jordan's king warned Israel of a "massive conflict" if it proceeds with plans to annex large parts of the occupied West Bank, as European Union foreign ministers agreed on Friday to step up diplomatic efforts to try to head off such a move.

Israel has vowed to annex Jewish settlements and the Jordan Valley, which could spell the end of the long-stalled peace process by making it virtually impossible to establish a viable Palestinian state. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has moved a step closer by reaching an agreement to form a

government after more than a year of political deadlock.

President Donald Trump's Middle East plan, which overwhelmingly favors Israel and was rejected by the Palestinians, gave a green light to annexation, but most of the rest of the international community is strongly opposed.

"Leaders who advocate a one-state solution do not understand what that would mean," Jordan's King Abdullah II said in an interview with the German magazine Der Spiegel published Friday.

"What would happen if the Palestinian National Authority collapsed? There would be more chaos and extremism in the region. If Israel really annexed the West Bank in July, it would lead to a massive conflict with the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan," he said.

Jordan is a close Western ally and one of only two Arab states to have signed a peace treaty with Israel. Abdullah declined to say whether annexation would threaten that agreement.

"I don't want to make threats and create an atmosphere of loggerheads, but we are considering all options. We agree with many countries in Europe and the international community that the law of strength should not apply in the Middle East," he said.

At a video-conference, EU foreign ministers reaffirmed their support for a two-state solution and opposition to any annexation. The ministers, whose countries are deeply divided in their approach to Israel, agreed to ramp up diplomatic efforts in coming days with Israel, the Palestinians, the United States and Arab countries.

"We reaffirm our position in support of a negotiated, two-state solution. For this to be possible, unilateral action from either side should be avoided and, for sure, international law should be upheld," EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said after chairing the meeting.

"We must work to discourage any possible initiative toward annexation," Borrell told reporters in Brussels. "International law has to be upheld. Here, and there, and everywhere."

He made no mention of the use of sanctions, saying only that the EU will use "all our diplomatic capacities in order to prevent any kind of unilateral action."

The ministers had planned to welcome the formation of a new Israeli government and offer the bloc's cooperation, but Netanyahu and his rival-turned-partner, Benny Gantz, have postponed the swearing-in of their controversial new Cabinet as the Israeli leader tries to quell infighting within his Likud party.

The ceremony, originally scheduled for Thursday, is now planned for Sunday to give Netanyahu more time to hand out coveted Cabinet appointments to members of his party. Their coalition agreement allows him to present an annexation proposal as soon as July 1.

The EU has long been committed to a two-state solution based on the 1967 lines, with the possibility of mutually agreed land-swaps. Israel seized east Jerusalem, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip in the 1967 war. The Palestinians want all three to form their future state.

The bloc has already rejected Trump's Mideast plan, which would allow Israel to annex about a third of the West Bank, leaving the Palestinians with heavily conditioned statehood in scattered territorial enclaves surrounded by Israel.

"In our opinion, an annexation is not compatible with international law,"

German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas said Friday. “From our point of view, changes to borders must, if at all, be the result of negotiations and happen in agreement between both sides.”

Jordan has been lobbying the EU to take “practical steps” to make sure annexation doesn’t happen.

In a statement, Jordan’s Foreign Minister Ayman Al-Safadi “stressed the need for the international community and the European Union in particular to take practical steps that reflect the rejection of any Israeli decision to annex.”



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[Jordan’s King Abdullah II](#)

Jordan repatriation continues with 16 flights to bring nationals home
Jordan eases lockdown, public sector to return to work on May 26

[**Lebanon central bank official probed**](#)

over currency crash

Author:

By SARAH EL DEEB | AP

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Fri, 2020-05-15 14:14

BEIRUT: Lebanon's financial prosecutor questioned a top central bank manager on Friday over the country's financial crisis, including the free fall of the Lebanese currency, a judicial official said.

Mazen Hamdan, the head of cash operations at the bank, is the most senior official to be interrogated in an ongoing probe into possible financial wrongdoing. He was ordered to appear for questioning about what Lebanon's official news agency called "the manipulation of the dollar exchange rate." The central bank denied charges of manipulation in a statement that detailed recent transactions with money traders.

The probe reflected a growing clash between the central bank and the government at a critical time, as Lebanon launches talks with the International Monetary Fund to negotiate a rescue plan amid an unprecedented economic and financial crisis. The talks come against the backdrop of a deepening liquidity crunch, negative economic growth, soaring inflation and a massive state debt.

The judicial official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to discuss the investigation, said Hamdan has not yet been formally charged.

In a statement, the central bank said it was lifting banking secrecy rules to show transactions between the bank and private money traders, to respond to the prosecutor's allegations. It said the transactions with private traders over one month were of a limited quantity and were no match to the fluctuations witnessed in the market. It added that no transactions with exchange bureaus occurred after May 5.

"There are no manipulations in the exchange market as a result of transactions with the central bank," it said.

Meanwhile, the central bank's staff union called for the release of Hamdan, denouncing a "continuous attack on the central bank" and saying Hamdan was only carrying out his administrative duties.

In recent days, authorities have cracked down on currency exchange bureaus as the Lebanese pound, pegged to the dollar for more than 20 years, lost 60% of its value in weeks. A number of money dealers and the head of their union were arrested and officials closed down some bureaus for operating without licenses. They accused others of violating orders from the central bank to trade at a new controlled rate.

The measures to contain the currency's free fall, including a cap on external transfers and adjusted exchange rates for dollar withdrawals from banks and money transfer bureaus, have created chaos on the black market and sowed panic among the public.

The central bank said it will provide dollars to importers at the rate of 3,200 pounds to the dollar – more than double the official pegged rate – to control the price of food. The black market rate has reached over 4,200

pounds to the pound in recent days.

The interrogation of Hamdan comes amid an unprecedented public spat between the head of the government and the governor of the central bank. Prime Minister Hassan Diab has held the governor, Riad Salameh, responsible for the pound's downward spiral. Salameh says he has been taking all necessary measures to contain the crisis and blames politicians for mispending bank finances to pay down massive state debt.



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[Mazen Hamdan](#)

[Banque du Liban](#)

Crisis-hit Lebanon ready to float pound after aid: Finance minister UN chief calls on Lebanon to disarm Hezbollah

[13 terrorists killed in Sinai operation, says Egypt army](#)

Fri, 2020-05-15 17:29

LONDON: Thirteen terrorists were killed in north Sinai in a security operation, the spokesman for the Egyptian armed forces said on Friday.

Seven militants were killed during the raid and six were later killed after they tried to flee but were tracked to their hideout using cameras.

The raid, carried out by the armed forces, took place after intelligence reports suggested that the terrorists were hiding out at a plantation in northern Sinai.

The armed forces seized a four-wheel drive vehicle, a motorbike, 10 explosive devices, four explosive belts, several rifles and ammunition as well as various mobile phones and walkie-talkies during the operation.

Security forces have been battling a long-running extremist insurgency in the Sinai Peninsula – in Egypt’s northeast – that is spearheaded by a local affiliate of Daesh.



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Egypt reports 15 military casualties in Sinai recentlyEgypt police say killed

6 militants in northern Sinai