

[Bahrain extends closure measures for two weeks starting April 23](#)

Author:

Wed, 2020-04-22 22:55

CAIRO: Bahrain extended the closure measures it took to limit the spread of coronavirus for two additional weeks which set to start from April 23 until May 7, state news agency reported on Wednesday.

Those measures include closing all cinemas, sports centres, gyms, salons, and restricting restaurants operations to food delivery and takeaway only, among other measures.

Bahrain registered 2009 cases till now with a death tally that stands at 7.



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Bahrain sets up coronavirus ICU in military hospital car park

Lebanese Parliament convenes amid protests

Wed, 2020-04-22 20:07

BEIRUT: The Lebanese Parliament convened for the third time this week on Wednesday as dozens of protestors again took to the streets in their cars to raise their concerns about rising poverty and hardships amid the COVID-19 lockdown.

Parliament dropped the expedited status of a proposed law to waive the immunity of presidents and ministers and returned it to parliamentary committees “for further study, to secure the independence of the judiciary and its constitutional right to trial.”

Parliament also rejected a bill proposing that – in line with demands of protestors for the past six months – the current parliamentary term be shortened and elections held as soon as possible, and another bill proposing the suspension of public works in order to focus on the construction of the Bisri Dam. The dam has been strongly opposed by the civil movement, residents of mountainous areas, and environmental activists.

Parliament did approve a proposed law put forward by MP Paula Yacoubian to ban pictures and posters of political leaders, officials, and employees in public places. Prime Minister Hassan Diab announced his approval of this move, while Progressive Socialist Party bloc MP Hadi Abou Hassan said, “It is implementation that matters.”

Independent MP Michel Moawad suggested that the law should also apply to “posters of religious figures and party flags,” referring to Hezbollah.

A number of MPs attempted to address Lebanon’s ongoing economic and social crisis, which has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. They warned of possible civic unrest and of the possibility of a greater collapse of the Lebanese lira against the dollar. A number of MPs also enquired about the fate of misappropriated funds.

Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri responded that the government “has completed its promised economic plan, and Parliament will soon discuss it.”

After the legislative session, Diab said the government’s reform plan would be discussed next week.

The civil movement continued its car-bound protests for the second day in succession – obeying the social-distancing guidelines – but protestors were unable to get close to where the legislative session was held.

The Ministry of Health reported five new COVID-19 cases, including two in Rayak in the Bekaa Valley, which brought the total number of cases in Lebanon to 682. One patient from Dinniyeh in northern Lebanon with underlying health issues died bringing the number of COVID-19-related deaths to 22.

Baalbek-Hermel Governor Bachir Khodr announced that the Palestinian refugee in the Galilee camp who tested positive for COVID-19 earlier – becoming the first case reported in Palestinian camps in Lebanon – had taken a second test and the result had been negative. Khodr claimed “all measures have been taken as if the result were positive.”

Health Minister Hamad Hassan said: “The Ministry of Health and international organizations, especially UNRWA, have a shared responsibility to implement the same measures adopted with the discovery of every other case in other parts of Lebanon.”

The camp’s entrances have been closed and other measures put in place by state security and municipal police. The Popular Committee inside the camp stressed the importance of committing to home quarantine, closing shops, and sanitizing neighborhoods, houses and cars.

Hamad also said that the ministry has “15 days to increase the number of randomized PCR tests to get a better understanding of the epidemic in Lebanon and take the appropriate measures in light of field data,” adding that the apparent decrease in the rate of infection is not a sufficient indicator to relax the current measures, in case that leads to a second wave of infections.

Dr. Iman Shankiti, World Health Organization (WHO) representative in Lebanon, said the measures taken to prevent the spread of the epidemic in Lebanon should continue. She counseled patience on the part of the Lebanese people, and said that Lebanon has entered international COVID-19 clinical trials.

The US Embassy in Lebanon announced on Wednesday that it will provide \$13.3 million to help stop the spread of COVID-19 in Lebanon, which includes an \$8 million donation to UNHCR to assist refugees and Lebanese host communities.



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First virus case in Lebanon Palestinian refugee camp: UNLebanon MPs meet in hall as protesters stage car convoy

[Iranian regime accused of corruption over COVID-19 test kits](#)

Wed, 2020-04-22 19:30

LONDON: London-based Iran International TV said on Wednesday that it has obtained a leaked document that reveals widespread corruption in the Iranian Health Ministry, the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and two organizations under the control of the Iranian supreme leader Ali Khamenei.

The document is a letter sent by a private company to an official at Iran's national coronavirus taskforce in the health ministry regarding the

importation of testing kits for the novel coronavirus COVID-19.

It reportedly reveals “the competition process” between a subsidiary affiliated with the IRGC and another organization controlled by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, seeking to establish the exclusive rights to import and distribute COVID-19 testing kits from a Korean company – MiCo BioMed – in Iran.

According to the letter, MiCo BioMed representatives were invited to Iran by a private company called Irgan Mehr.

The Iran International report claimed that several health ministry officials “used their influence” to sign a contract with the Korean company through a subsidiary foundation under the direct control of the Supreme Leader of Iran, known as the Execution of Imam Khomeini’s Order foundation (EIKO).

This enabled them to buy the testing kits for around 25,000 Iranian Toman (\$5.94) and sell them for 60,000 Iranian Toman (\$14.25).

The negotiations with MiCo BioMed began in late February and the Korean company was given assurances that although American parts were used in the testing kits, US sanctions would not hinder the deal, Iran International reported.

The negotiations stalled when the Medical Community Basij Organization, a paramilitary organization affiliated with the IRGC, confiscated the equipment and froze the funds for the devices – as well as 300 test kits – holding them “hostage” on condition it would receive the exclusive rights to distribute the products in Iran.

While Irgan Mehr was waiting to receive the relevant distribution permits from the Health Ministry, another subsidiary of the EIKO, called KBC, stepped in and signed a contract with MiCo BioMed, without a permit from the ministry, the letter reportedly reveals.

Sadeq Saba from Iran International said: “The leaked letter that we have seen states that the Korean company was surprised to see how the regime’s institutions are fighting over financial gain instead of focusing on the coronavirus crisis.

“With many cases such as this, it seems that the main problem in fighting the coronavirus crisis in Iran is the corruption within the regime and not the sanctions.”

Dr. Majid Rafizadeh, an Iranian-American political scientist, told Arab News the report is an example of the regime’s “total disregard for their citizens and human life.”

He said there is widespread corruption within Iran’s Ministry of Health, the IRGC and other organizations controlled by the Iranian regime, claiming that financial and political corruption at the top level of Iranian authorities has been documented for almost four decades.

“The Iranian regime’s corruption and mishandling of the coronavirus pandemic, and its attempts to hide and downplay the scope of the coronavirus in the country have sparked anger and fury inside Iran and abroad,” he said. “Once again, the regime’s actions show that it prioritizes its revolutionary ideals and its survival over public health and human lives.”



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Iran state broadcaster keeps internet slow by withholding needed frequency bands

[Organizers recommend postponing Expo 2020 Dubai by a year](#)

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Tue, 2020-04-21 17:06

PARIS: Organizers of the Expo 2020 global trade fair have recommended pushing it back a year owing to the coronavirus, while keeping the name unchanged, they said Tuesday.

Planned to open in October, the six-month expo in Dubai has hoped to attract around 25 million visitors to a country that has one of the most diversified economies in the Gulf region.

On Tuesday, a statement said the executive committee of the Bureau International des Expositions "has unanimously agreed to propose the postponement of Expo 2020 Dubai to 1 October 2021 – 31 March 2022.

"Assessing the unforeseen impact of the Covid-19 on public health, economic activity and global restrictions on movement, the Executive Committee unanimously recommended approving the UAE's request to postpone the Expo, and to maintain the name 'Expo 2020 Dubai'," the statement said in reference to the United Arab Emirates.

Changing the date requires consent of a two-thirds majority of BIE member states, the statement added, with a vote to "be carried out remotely between Friday 24 April and Friday 29 May."

Dubai, known for hosting hundreds of conferences annually, has already scrapped a string of cultural and entertainment events but had not announced plans to postpone the much-anticipated Expo.

As of 1100 GMT on Tuesday, a tally from official sources compiled by AFP showed that the Middle East has reported 129,497 cases of COVID-19, with 5,683 deaths.



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UAE officially asks to postpone Expo 2020 Dubai

[Lebanon MPs meet in hall as protesters stage car convoy](#)

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Tue, 2020-04-21 17:04

BEIRUT: Lebanon's parliament sat Tuesday in a conference hall to allow for social distancing between lawmakers amid the coronavirus pandemic, while outside anti-government protesters demonstrated in a car convoy.

As the country struggles with a battered economy, MPs approved the re-allocation of \$40 million from the World Bank to help fight COVID-19, which has officially infected 677 people and killed 21 nationwide.

It also passed a law to fight corruption in the public sector and set up a national body in charge of stamping out graft.

On the agenda of the three-day session were proposals for a divisive general amnesty, to legalize cannabis for medical use, and to lift immunity for ministers and lawmakers to allow prosecutions for corruption.

Outside the venue, dozens of protesters drove a noisy convoy of cars covered in slogans, drivers honking their horns and passengers brandishing the national flag and leaning out of the windows in face masks.

They took to the streets on wheels to protest deteriorating living conditions while maintaining social distancing, as they kept up the pressure on a political elite under fire since mass protests erupted last October.

"Today, instead of passing a general amnesty law... they could pass a law on the independence of the judiciary," Jad Assaileh, a young demonstrator said.

"We want to recover the stolen money," he said, referring to allegations that Lebanon's ruling elite transferred billions out of the country while regular citizens were prevented from withdrawing their savings by the banks.

Similar protests took place in the cities of Saida and Tripoli.

Lebanon's worst economic crisis since the 1975-1990 civil war is now compounded by the lockdown. Poverty has risen to 45 percent of the population, according to official estimates.

Protests had petered out after a new government took office in January, and demonstrators have largely remained at home since the coronavirus lockdown started mid-March.

But on Friday, hundreds again protested in Tripoli to mark six months since

the street movement started to demand an overhaul of a ruling class widely deemed inept and corrupt.

The lawmakers met in a 1,000 seat conference hall at the UNESCO Palace in Beirut, as part of measures to halt the spread of the novel coronavirus. Among their 66 items to discuss, legalizing growing marijuana for medical purposes was expected to be approved by a majority as it could generate revenue for the indebted state.

Lebanon bans growing, selling and consuming cannabis, but illicit production in the country's east has developed over decades into a multi-million-dollar industry.

No consensus was in sight, however, for a general amnesty to free thousands of detainees and to suspend arrest warrants for thousands more.

Supporters – which include Shiite movements Hezbollah and Amal as well as the Sunni Future Movement – say an amnesty could lessen overcrowding in jails housing 9,000 prisoners.

But its detractors, including the president's Christian parliamentary bloc, say the bill is merely an attempt to boost popular support.

The amnesty has long been a demand of the families of some 1,200 so-called "Islamist detainees," most of whom hail from the Sunni-majority city of Tripoli, where the former premier's Future Movement is dominant.

They are accused of carrying out crimes including fighting and assaulting the army, taking part in clashes in the city, and planning explosives attacks. Families have also clamoured for the release of thousands more detainees from the eastern regions of Baalbek and Hermel, where Hezbollah and the parliament speaker's Amal Movement are powerful.

Most of these are accused of drug-linked crimes including growing hashish illegally, or other offenses such as stealing cars.

Lebanon, one of the most indebted countries in the world with a debt equivalent to 170 percent of its GDP, defaulted on payments for the first time last month.

As the country faces an acute liquidity crisis, banks have banned transfers abroad and gradually restricted dollar withdrawals until suspending them last month.

The Lebanese pound has for decades been pegged to the dollar, but in recent months lost half of its official value on the black market.

The official exchange rate remains 1,507 Lebanese pounds to the dollar.

The banks earlier this month set their rate at 2,600 pounds to the dollar, but money changers were offering more than 3,200 pounds for the greenback on Tuesday on the black market.

On Tuesday, the central bank asked banks to allow depositors with foreign currency accounts to withdraw their savings in Lebanese pounds at the "market rate," likely to signify 2,600 pounds to the dollar.



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No new corona cases in Lebanon in past 24 hours