

Lebanese govt vows reform with help of \$11bn international aid package

Tue, 2020-04-07 00:13

BEIRUT: The Lebanese government has called for international financial support to help it implement plans to tackle the country's crippling economic crisis.

President Michel Aoun and Prime Minister Hassan Diab told a meeting of representatives of member states of the International Support Group (ISG) for Lebanon that their priority was to resolve the nation's financial meltdown which had been compounded by the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. Asking for ISG help in line with its \$11 billion CEDRE conference aid pledges – made on condition of internal reforms in Lebanon – was seen by major Lebanese parties, especially Hezbollah and the Amal Movement, as the preferred option to seeking assistance from the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

The impact of restrictions on movement imposed to stop the spread of COVID-19 has only served to deepen the economic turmoil in Lebanon, paralyzing business activity and adding to the hardships of its people. According to the World Bank, poverty rates in the country have increased to 40 percent. During the meeting with the ISG delegates – which was attended by UN special coordinator for Lebanon, Jan Kubis – President Aoun said: "Lebanon was preparing to launch a workplan to address its economic, financial and social crises when the coronavirus pandemic struck the world.

"The country was forced to declare a health emergency, which froze its recovery and exacerbated its crises, adding to them a health crisis, and now we face all these crises and repercussions and we welcome any international assistance.

BACKGROUND

- **The impact of restrictions on movement imposed to stop the spread of COVID-19 has only served to deepen the economic turmoil in Lebanon, paralyzing business activity and adding to the hardships of its people. According to the World Bank, poverty rates in the country have increased to 40 percent.**
- **Lebanese prime minister says his government has pledged to carry out a complete reform program to restructure the banking sector and the budget of the Central Bank.**

"Lebanon suffers from a significant economic contraction, a decline in domestic demand and import, a severe shortage of foreign currencies, high unemployment and poverty rates, high prices and a low exchange rate of the Lebanese pound in the black market, in addition to the deficit in public

finance due to a decline in tax revenues.

“The state decided to suspend payments for Eurobonds to contain the budget deficit and stop the depletion of its foreign currency reserves that have reached very low levels.”

He added: “The state is about to complete preparing a comprehensive economic-financial plan, with the aim of correcting the deep imbalances in the economy.

“Given the gravity of the financial situation and the significant economic effects on the Lebanese people, the residents, and the refugees, the reform program will need foreign financial support, and we rely heavily on \$11 billion which CEDRE pledged to offer to Lebanon.”

Diab urged the ISG to launch “the economic, financial, monetary, and social reform plan based on good governance, and we are putting the final touches on it.”

The premier said his government pledged to carry out a complete reform program to restructure the banking sector and the budget of the Central Bank. “We decided to conduct an audit of the Central Bank accounts for full transparency, and to strengthen our negotiating position in this difficult period in the history of Lebanon.”

Kubis said: “The COVID-19 crisis poses an unprecedented challenge for the Lebanese people due to the country’s economic problems, rampant corruption, and social pressures which cause despair.”



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Lebanon gives financial aid to students affected by France’s coronavirus lockdown
Palestinian, Syrian refugees in Lebanon camps brace for virus

Gaza sewing factories try to meet growing demand for protective gear

Tue, 2020-04-07 00:09

GAZA CITY: Emad Haboub works around the clock to produce protective clothing, the demand for which has increased worldwide with the spread of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19).

His factory used to supply hospitals before the crisis, but he now produces protective gear – such as medical overalls – to be sold to both the local market as well as the West Bank.

“We currently work on a daily basis, even on weekends and for 12 hours a day, to produce protective gear in order to meet the growing need,” Haboub, 47, told Arab News.

“There is an acute shortage of raw materials in the Gaza Strip, and we are currently trying to import them from abroad so that we can continue the work,” he added.

While the needs of the local market can be covered, the demand in the West Bank increases daily with the rise of confirmed cases.

At least 252 Palestinians have been infected with COVID-19, 12 of whom were in the Gaza Strip while the rest were in the West Bank. One fatality has been reported.

The Gaza Strip suffers from a severe economic recession due to the Israeli blockade that has been imposed on it for about 14 years. The unemployment rate reached 52 percent during 2019, according to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics.

Majed Shubair, who has been sewing for 40 years, believes that the current period is one of the best in terms of continuous work since Hamas took control of the Gaza Strip in 2007. “I work all week without stopping, and this has not happened for many years,” Shubair, who has 7 children, said.

FASTFACT

The Gaza Strip suffers from a severe economic recession due to the Israeli blockade that has been imposed on it for about 14 years. The unemployment rate reached 52 percent during 2019, according to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics.

“We hope that this global crisis ends, but at the same time we hope that work continues and that the Gaza Strip can live like the rest of the world. We have been suffering for many years without respite.”

Hassan Shehada, 56, whose sewing factory has been producing clothing for Israeli merchants for many years, has switched to producing medical masks, which he has been doing for three weeks now.

“With the closure of markets and stores in Israel, the production of clothing

for Israeli merchants is no longer important. The demand for medical masks has increased, and production here has shifted accordingly,” Shehada said. “I produce for the local market, but there is shortage of raw materials. Without them, I cannot produce for the Gaza Strip,” he said. “What Gaza needs is work. This pandemic may end, but the Gaza Strip crisis will not end.”



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‘Corona cake’ spreading fast in GazaIsrael links COVID-19 aid for Gaza to recovering soldiers

[Dengue fever outbreak swamps Yemeni hospitals](#)

Tue, 2020-04-07 00:32

AL-MUKALLA: An outbreak of the deadly dengue fever in Yemen is putting the country’s strained health system under huge pressure as it prepares for the prospect of dealing with a flood of coronavirus disease (COVID-19) patients, doctors have warned.

Health workers at Ibn Sina hospital in Al-Mukalla, the capital of Yemen’s

southeastern Hadramout province, staged a protest calling for staff to be issued with personal protective equipment (PPE) after they were forced to treat a patient who died with suspected COVID-19, without having even gloves or masks to wear.

Recent flash floods across Yemen have led to a new wave of dengue fever that has killed as many as 59 people and infected more than 7,400 others. The virus, spread by mosquitoes, causes respiratory problems and symptoms very similar to COVID-19.

Due to a lack of cash, local health authorities in Yemen have been unable to carry out vital insecticide spraying and they are calling for immediate intervention from the Yemeni government and international aid organizations to curb the spread of dengue fever before the number of patients with the disease overwhelms hospitals.

Tawfeeq Balteour, a doctor at Ibn Sina Hospital, said that although tests later found the young male patient had died from dengue fever and not COVID-19, worried medics held a demonstration the next day appealing for PPE. "The (hospital) administration says it will release its stock of the equipment (PPE) when the first case (of COVID-19) occurs," said Balteour, who joined the protest. "Seasonal fever deaths are causing fear among doctors." Officials told Arab News there was a severe shortage of PPE and the hospital was conserving stocks until new World Health Organization (WHO) supplies arrived.

Aden, Taiz, Lahj, Hadramout, Abyan and Shabwa have been the areas worst affected by the latest outbreak of dengue fever said Dr. Yasser Abdullah Baheshm, director of the Aden-based National Malaria Control Program, adding that 42 people had died from the disease in Aden alone. Doctors in Yemeni hospitals are becoming increasingly wary about treating patients showing symptoms of COVID-19.

BACKGROUND

Health workers at Ibn Sina hospital in Al-Mukalla staged a protest calling for staff to be issued with personal protective equipment (PPE) after they were forced to treat a patient who died with suspected COVID-19, without having even gloves or masks to wear.

Farouq Qaid Naji, a doctor at Al-Jumhuriya Hospital in the port city of Aden, told Arab News: "We receive at least 25 new cases (of dengue fever) daily. Each new case frightens doctors, nurses and health workers."

Hospital administrators have set up a special tent to handle dengue fever cases in a bid to help ease fears and pressure in emergency rooms.

Baheshm called for swift Yemeni government action to tackle the spread of dengue fever in case COVID-19 sweeps the country.

"Health facilities are burdened with dengue fever cases and the diseases have distracted attention and efforts to fight COVID-19. Most of beds at Ibn Sina hospital are taken by dengue fever patients. We need those beds for coronavirus patients.

"After the recent rains and floods, I expect the number of cases and deaths will increase rapidly. We are urgently in need of a health education

campaign. We also seek to target vector breeding sites and launch indoor and outdoor fogging spray,” he added.



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Global rights groups condemn deadly attack on Yemen jail
Houthis launch ballistic missile attack against Yemen's Saada

[Dubai says essential trips during curfew hours require permit](#)

Sun, 2020-04-05 23:40

DUBAI: The Dubai Government said members of the public who need to leave their houses “for essential purposes” during sterilization operations must obtain a permit.

The announcement by the Supreme Committee of Crisis and Disaster Management allows members of the general public to register on the website <https://dxbpermit.gov.ae/home> to seek permits for leaving during the 24-hour restriction set to last two weeks.

Registering and obtaining permission through the portal is “mandatory” for leaving for essential purposes, the statement said.

Supreme Committee of Crisis & Disaster Management in Dubai: The movement permit website is for general members of the public who are allowed to go out for essential needs such as buying food and medicine, medical emergencies and for COVID-19 testing.

pic.twitter.com/FepsvrjR3w

– Dubai Media Office (@DXBMediaOffice) [April 5, 2020](#)

Employees of vital exempt sectors do not need to apply if leaving for work, it said, adding that they should obtain a letter from their employer stating the purpose of their commute.

The Committee stressed that those violating the restrictions will face stringent legal action.

Dubai police has also called on the public to stay at home and abide by the precautionary measures that were extended in the emirate for two weeks around the clock.

Maj. Gen. Kamel Al-Suwaidi said methods and technologies such as radars and police patrols will be used to determine any trips by individuals during the sterilization hours.

He said individuals who need to pass through Dubai onto other emirates will be allowed to use Emirates Road, formerly known as Dubai Bypass Road. A fine of Dh3,000 will be issued against individuals violating the curfew.

Dubai Police urges the public to stay home and maintain physical distance [#StayHome](#) pic.twitter.com/0cdTjD42rE

– Dubai Police شرطة دبي (@DubaiPoliceHQ) [April 5, 2020](#)



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Dubai residents to get free bus rides, 50% discount on taxi fares UAE supports Saudi call for oil talks, joint effort needed by all

[Revealed: How coronavirus outbreak shines light on violations inside Qatar's labor camps](#)

Sun, 2020-04-05 22:51

DUBAI: For as long as he lived in Qatar, Antony, from Batticaloa in Sri Lanka, led a sort of double life.

By day, he was a cleaner at the gleaming offices of Qatar Foundation and Qatar National Convention Center in north Doha.

By night, he was a miserable occupant of a cramped room in a derelict

building in the Industrial Area, a sprawling expanse of workers' accommodation, warehouses, vehicle-repair shops and factories, known locally as Sanaya.

Looking back, Antony can be excused for believing that it was destiny that brought him back to Sri Lanka a few months ago. Many of his former dormitory mates and co-workers now find themselves in a virtual prison, sealed off inside the Industrial Area by Qatari internal security following the coronavirus outbreak in the country.

Residents of Doha know there is only one way of describing what has been unfolding in the slumlike neighborhood: A man-made tragedy.

Qatar has been engaged in a damage-control exercise since March 11, when it enforced a strict lockdown of the Industrial Area after the Ministry of Public Health said that 238 new cases had been discovered among people "who reside in one residential complex."



Migrant workers, on whom Qatar is heavily reliant, are bearing the brunt of a coronavirus outbreak. (AFP)

Still, scrutiny of Qatar's treatment of migrant workers has intensified. In an open letter to Sheikh Khalid bin Khalifa bin Abdulaziz, Qatar's prime minister, on March 31, 16 nongovernmental organizations and trade unions jointly called for adequate protection of the workforce.

The coalition, which includes Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and Migrant Rights.org, has asked Doha to supplement steps already taken with "further actions that protect public health and are consistent with fundamental human rights, including the principle of non-discrimination."

It said: "Qatari authorities should, among other recommendations, ensure that

all migrant workers, including undocumented workers, quarantined or otherwise, have access to testing and get appropriate medical treatment.” Until February, the world had heard little about what Qatari authorities described euphemistically as “one residential complex” – an overcrowded shantytown in which most of Qatar’s workforce is housed. The abject squalor of the Industrial Area has long been an open secret in the wealthy, gas-rich country, but its remote location meant it was safely out of the sight of journalists on all-expenses-paid Qatar tours and visiting officials of international organizations.

Now, with possibly thousands of workers infected with the coronavirus and the entire district under strict lockdown, the public-health crisis has become yet another blot on Qatar’s reputation – and a stain on the Arab world’s collective conscience.

A diplomatic source said: “The situation (as of Friday) is under control, but not entirely. There are serious restrictions on workers’ movement.”

A March 20 report in the UK’s Guardian newspaper said: “No one can enter or leave, say workers who live in the area. Inside the quarantined camps, workers describe an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty.”

Citing sources inside the Industrial Area, the newspaper said that some workers were being put on unpaid leave until further notice, with only food and accommodation covered.

“The situation is getting worse each day. Workers from camp 1 to camp 32 are in lockdown. My friends who live there are in extreme panic,” one worker from Bangladesh told the Guardian.

The AFP news agency quoted a Pakistani resident, who was beginning a second week under mandatory quarantine, as saying: “We’ve been in lockdown for the last eight to 10 days, and we don’t know when it will end.

“The basic issue we are facing now is groceries. The government is providing us with food, but only after some days – and little things only.”

There are an estimated 2 million migrant workers in Qatar, mostly from South Asia and East Africa. They account for 95 percent of the country’s working population.

This segment of the population has swelled in recent years as the Gulf state pumps billions of dollars into the construction sector as the host of the FIFA World Cup in 2022.

Human-rights organizations have repeatedly criticized labor practices in Qatar, particularly since it began importing armies of impoverished workers to build a new rapid transit system and a string of football stadiums among other trophy projects.

Except for the few months of the year when the weather in the country is bearable, these laborers have been toiling away day and night at different project sites, most located miles from their grim bedroom community – the Industrial Area.

For a long time, the entire neighborhood resembled the set of “District 9,” a 2009 film about a fictional internment camp in South Africa in which a population of sick and malnourished aliens is forced to live in pathetic conditions on Earth.

It was obvious that the rulers of Qatar had no shortage of funds when it came to investing in high-return diplomatic initiatives, bidding for prestigious

sports events, or bankrolling fellow Islamists across the Middle East. Yet, when it came to its own backyard, namely its wretched labor camps, there seemed inexplicably to be insufficient gas wealth to make these sites merely inhabitable.

Opinion

This section contains relevant reference points, placed in (Opinion field)

In recent years, the approach roads to the Industrial Area have become more navigable with the completion of a number of highways among other infrastructure projects. But such improvements have made little difference to the lives of the construction workers themselves. The streets have potholes so large that motorists can be excused for thinking they are not in the world's richest country on a per capita basis, but in a strange, benighted land.

Streets are lined with shabby dormitories, where laborers live often crammed 10 to a room, and sharing kitchens and toilets in unsanitary conditions. Practices such as "social distancing" and self-isolating – essential precautions to prevent the spread of any infectious disease – are impossible in such surroundings.

Street lighting is so inadequate and the dust stirred up by passing vehicles so thick that venturing into the Industrial Area at night has never been for the faint of heart, especially if the visitor is from one of Doha's upmarket neighborhoods just a few miles away – West Bay, Lusail or Pearl Qatar, the artificial island.

Even before the new coronavirus appeared as a menace to the Industrial Area's residents, unnatural death was far from a rare occurrence, especially during the Gulf state's long, hot summer.



Migrant workers, on whom Qatar is heavily reliant, are bearing the brunt of a coronavirus outbreak. (AFP)

Hundreds of thousands of laborers have been exposed to potentially fatal levels of heat stress while working in temperatures of up to 45 C for up to 10 hours a day.

Since high temperatures have an adverse effect on the cardiovascular system, medical experts believe there is a direct correlation between the abnormally high fatality rates among workers and heat stress in the summer months. Data from the Indian government showed that 1,678 of its citizens died in Qatar between 2012 and August 2018.

Between 2012 and 2017, at least 1,025 Nepalis died in Qatar from cardiac arrest, respiratory failure and “sickness” among other causes.

According to reports, in most cases no autopsies were performed on the bodies of migrant workers, whose deaths were attributed to cardiovascular or “natural” causes.

Paradoxically, for all the international scrutiny that the Industrial Area’s coronavirus outbreak is drawing, repercussions of the global pandemic could leave Qatar’s migrant workers even more vulnerable in the coming days.

According to International Labor Organization estimates, the predicted economic and labor crisis could increase unemployment worldwide by almost 25 million.

For Antony, the one-time Industrial Area resident, returning to Sri Lanka had been a wrenching decision given the limited job prospects for an unskilled worker. But with the benefit of hindsight, he has absolutely no regrets.



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As world locks down, Qatari construction presses ahead
Coronavirus hits migrant workers in Qatar