

European leaders' video-conference on Syria brought extra cash to Ankara

Author:

Thu, 2020-03-19 23:21

ANKARA: Amid escalating tensions between Brussels and Ankara over refugee management policy, the latest video conference between Turkish, French, German and UK leaders resulted in an increase of EU funds for refugees in Turkey.

In their meeting with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron committed to provide more humanitarian funding.

UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson, whose country was excluded previously from EU leaders' talks, also attended the video conference – a sign that the UK intends to re-engage into the Syria crisis.

Hosting about four million refugees, most of whom coming from Syria, Erdogan had asked for more EU assistance for handling the crisis.

After Erdogan opened his country's borders with the EU for the mass exodus of refugees, migrants from different nationalities amassed on the Turkish-Greek border before being pushed back by the Greek authorities.

Brussels accused Turkey of using refugees as bargaining chips for getting more help from the EU.

Turkey in turn blamed the EU for not keeping financial and political promises under the refugee deal concluded between the parties in March 2016, especially regarding financial aid that was not provided in full, and accelerated visa facilitation that was not achieved.

Out of €6 billion (\$6.4 billion) committed by the EU in the past for refugees in Turkey, only about €3.2 billion has been paid.

Fresh cash pledges are expected to prevent thousands of refugees from leaving the country towards Europe by dangerous land and sea journeys.

Sinem Adar, a researcher on Turkey at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs, said the willingness to provide more funds to Turkey was primarily about improving social and economic participation of refugees in Turkey.

"The underlying assumption is that most of the Syrian refugees in Turkey are there to stay and that Turkey needs more support to better integrate this population. The existing research supports this assumption," she told Arab News.

But the EU funding is not promised as a direct payment to the Turkish

government.

Concerning how potential new funds will be dispersed, Adar said, the EU had certain budgetary stipulations that it needed to follow.

"This means that providing the funds directly to the government should not be possible. Thus, I would expect that any potential funds will be dispersed on a project basis and to the ministries, NGOs, international organizations and municipalities. If anything, I think the EU should increase support to local actors in Turkey," she added.

Adar thinks that, following the EU's potential increase of funds, the concession from the Turkish side will be commitment to EU-Turkish cooperation over migration.

"Given that EU member states lack agreement among themselves over a common asylum policy, getting the support of Turkey on migration and border management is important for the EU," she said.

"Regarding the political situation in Turkey, it is clear that accession negotiations and visa liberalization are (and should be) off the table. But the modernization of (the) customs union can provide the EU with a useful instrument to emphasize the rule of law issues. The second issue is of course whether, and if so how, Turkey should be given the message that refugee lives are and should not be instruments for political bargain."

Ankara has long criticized the EU, saying that it bears too much responsibility in handling refugee flow from Syria, and that European nations have failed to do their part.

For Berkay Mandiraci, a Turkey analyst at the International Crisis Group, the timing and quantity of the new funding remains unclear.

"This is critical as the humanitarian aid and basic service needs of displaced civilians in Idlib as well as thousands of migrants stranded at the Turkey-Greece border make new cooperation imminent," he told Arab News. "But EU leaders are unwilling to compromise quickly to what they and the Europeans have perceived as Ankara's blackmail."

Experts also underline the need for an urgent solution to the ongoing humanitarian crisis along the Turkish-Greek borders vis-à-vis the global coronavirus outbreak, considering that the Syrian war has entered its tenth year.

Protecting refugee camps from the outbreak where social distancing rules do not work is vital to prevent another humanitarian crises, especially considering an impending "catastrophe" in rebel-held Idlib, with more and more civilians displaced in a short period of time – almost one million in just two months.

"Fears of the spread of the coronavirus among those displaced by conflict requires more funding for medical services and facilities, which is greatly lacking," Mandiraci said.



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Greek police use tear gas on migrants at Turkish border
HRW denounces Greece over migrants held on warship

[Lebanon closes land, air and sea borders as UN offers help to fight virus](#)

Author:

Thu, 2020-03-19 23:13

BEIRUT: Lebanon has become one of the latest countries to close its land, air and sea borders in a bid to slow the spread of the killer coronavirus and avoid overwhelming hospitals.

President Michel Aoun on Thursday presided over a Lebanese Cabinet session wearing a face mask and ministers were asked to don gloves and face shields while keeping a safe distance between each other to help prevent transmission of the virus.

"It was my first time wearing a face mask because the risk has increased," said Minister of Health Hamad Hassan at the end of the meeting.

"Six new unknown-source cases were detected. They were the result of a community transmission, which makes the situation more dangerous. I requested the isolation of the two regions with the highest number of cases. I also asked the security forces to be strict to the point of prohibiting people from leaving their houses," he added.

Lebanon currently has 149 confirmed cases of COVID-19 disease, with four deaths.

Meanwhile, during a meeting with representatives of international organizations, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said: "The UN is ready to assist Lebanon, its government and people during these difficult times facing the country, the region and the world."

Despite power cuts and water shortages in some parts of the country, many Lebanese citizens set up temporary offices to work from home. Meanwhile, security personnel issued tickets to those breaching government orders banning gatherings and the opening of stores.

Private and public transport in the country has almost ground to a halt, but food shops did not report any of the frantic scenes of panic buying witnessed in Europe and the US.

As cases of the virus continued to rise, Rafik Hariri University Hospital (RHUH) on the outskirts of southern Beirut, said it was running short of coronavirus testing kits and would have to limit their use to urgent patients only until a delivery of 20,000 packs arrived from abroad.

Hassan ordered private laboratories conducting coronavirus tests to "report any confirmed cases or risk penalties."

Lebanon's airport-closure move excluded UNIFIL (UN Interim Force in Lebanon) aircraft, diplomatic missions accredited in Lebanon, international organizations, cargo flights and passengers working for oil and gas exploration companies.

In a message to employees and the Lebanese people, Mohamad El-Hout, chairman of Middle East Airlines (MEA), which has been forced to ground its fleet, said: "MEA had faced many similar hardships before, where its fleet was grounded for many days. However, the company is able to overcome this situation and has the capabilities to do so. We will receive new aircraft and fly again."

One pilot and two flight attendants were infected while working on flights bringing Lebanese citizens back home from countries affected by the coronavirus.

Lebanese workers faced with the prospect of being laid off due to business closures have been appealing for financial help.

"The private sector is living the most difficult and dangerous stage of its history because all the negative factors have hit the country at once, with the latest one being the spread of the coronavirus," said Mohamed Choucair, president of the Lebanese economic organizations.

"I hope that the general mobilization and the health emergency declared by the government were accompanied by a set of incentives to cut the losses institutions are suffering from in the same way that other countries have," the former minister added.

He warned that a social explosion would be disastrous for the country.



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Lebanon declares national emergency
Coronavirus claims two with nearly 70 cases confirmed in Lebanon

[British ambassador to Kuwait apologizes over embassy coronavirus](#)

'charity' tweet

Thu, 2020-03-19 22:50

LONDON: The British ambassador to Kuwait apologized on Thursday after his embassy staff urged British expatriates stuck in the emirate without money due to coronavirus to seek charity.

In a tweet, that was later deleted, the embassy called on British citizens to reach "friends, family or local charities in Kuwait, such as Bait Alzakat or the Salvation Army" for assistance if they "didn't have enough money."

The tweet was sent as part of a question and answer session held by the embassy for British citizens concerned about the coronavirus.



UKinKuwait   
@ukinkuwait



If you are stuck in Kuwait and you don't have enough money, please seek assistance through friends/family or local charities in Kuwait like Bait Alzakat or Salvation Army.

11:53 · 19 Mar 20 · [Twitter Web Client](#)

1,811 Retweets **1,188 Likes**

British ambassador to Kuwait Michael Davenport later tweeted apologetically that he takes full responsibility for what he described as a "poorly phrased" post.

"Message to British Nationals in Kuwait: the British Embassy is fully operational and totally committed to providing support to British Nationals in Kuwait at this anxious and distressing time."

2/2 I apologise for one of our tweets during today's Q&A which was poorly phrased. I take responsibility for that. I encourage all British Nationals to contact us on social media or by calling 22594320 with any concerns. We will respond just as quickly as we can [@ukinkuwait](#)

– Michael Davenport (@DavenportKuwait) [March 19, 2020](#)

Some replied saying the UK should be able to provide financial assistance to its citizens due to the current situation.

"I really feel sorry for the British citizens a great disappointment for them," wrote one Twitter user.

"I'm really amazed by such a response! What is the rule of the embassy at such circumstances to help their citizens? Kuwait will never hesitate to help," another user wrote.

"The British embassy should not worry about the British brothers in Kuwait, they are in their country and we are at their service at any time," said a tweet by a Kuwaiti citizen.

Later, the embassy said it could not provide financial assistance to British nationals and always advised people to take out travel insurance. In certain circumstances the embassy could issue UK nationals with an emergency loan.

Kuwait reported six new coronavirus cases on Thursday, bringing the total to 148.

Kuwait, along with Saudi Arabia, have suspended all international flights and closed most public spaces. Other Gulf states have restricted entry and movement.





UKinKuwait   
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[UAE stops issuing visas on arrival and bans citizens from traveling abroad over coronavirus](#)

Wed, 2020-03-18 15:09

DUBAI: The United Arab Emirates will temporarily stop issuing visas on

arrival starting March 19, the country's embassy in London tweeted on Tuesday.

"Please be advised that the temporary suspension of issuing visas upon arrival is applicable to all countries," the press office at the Emirati Embassy in London told Arab News.

The tweet included a link to all the countries who can get a visa on arrival.

NEW: [#UAE](#) takes extra steps to combat the spread of [#COVID19](#) that will affect travellers from the UK:

- from March 19 no visas on arrival will be issued until further notice. UAE residents are not affected.

See list of visa on arrival countries here: <https://t.co/RstTFXJ0q1>

- UAE Embassy UK (@UAEEmbassyUK) [March 18, 2020](#)

The UK government told citizens that visas on arrivals have been suspended to the UAE, on their travel advisory website. The new travel regulation does not apply to UAE citizens and residents, who may be tested upon arrival and asked to self-isolate or be quarantined.

Australia's Ambassador to the UAE Heidi Venamore tweeted that "UAE will suspend issuing all visas on arrival, including for Australians."

From 19 March, the [#UAE](#) will suspend issuing all visas on arrival, including for Australians. Australians living in the UAE with existing resident visas are not affected. [#AusInUAE](#) [#Australia](#) [#COVID2019](#) [@Smartraveller](#) pic.twitter.com/YuzoJDK2cA

- Heidi Venamore PSM (@AusAmbUAE) [March 18, 2020](#)

The UAE had already issued a temporary suspension of entry visas into the country effective March 17 however have exempted some countries from the ban and diplomatic passports.

The UAE also said on Wednesday that it had banned its citizens from travelling abroad until further notice over coronavirus fears, Emirates News Agency (WAM) reported.



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Iran reports largest spike in coronavirus fatalities as 147 more dieLIVE:
Middle East coronavirus cases continue to rise

[Iran reports largest spike in coronavirus fatalities as 147 more die](#)

Author:

AP

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1584529946107039900

Wed, 2020-03-18 11:04

TEHRAN: Iran reported its single biggest jump in deaths from the new coronavirus on Wednesday, saying that another 147 had died in a nearly 15

percent spike that raises the death toll to 1,135 people nationwide.

It marks the biggest 24-hour rise in deaths since officials first acknowledged cases of the virus in Iran in mid-February.

The rise in deaths comes as the number of cases continues to grow each day, with some 17,361 people having been infected nationwide, according to a briefing Wednesday by Iran's deputy health minister, Alireza Raisi.

The outbreak has cast a shadow over the Persian New Year, Nowruz, a normally joyous holiday that begins on Friday. Health officials have urged the public to avoid travel and crowded places. But many seem to be ignoring the warnings, raising the risk of further outbreaks.

Some food markets in the capital, Tehran, were still packed on Wednesday, and highways were crowded with traffic as families traveled between cities. Iran also announced it would close mosques for communal Friday prayers for a third consecutive week.

Raisi criticized people for not adhering to the warnings, saying on national television the virus is very serious. "This is not a good situation at all," he said as he implored people to stay home.

Iran's President Hassan Rouhani on Wednesday defended his government's response to the coronavirus outbreak in the face of widespread criticism that officials acted too slowly and may have even covered up initial cases before infections rapidly spread across the country.

In a speech to his Cabinet, Rouhani said the government was "straightforward" with the nation, saying it announced the outbreak as soon as it learned about it on Feb. 19.

"We spoke to people in an honest way. We had no delay," he added.

The government has come under heavy criticism for what has been seen as a slow and inadequate response. For weeks, government officials implored clerics to shut down crowded holy shrines to stymie the spread of the virus. The government finally closed the shrines this week.

"It was difficult of course to shut down mosques and holy sites, but we did it. It was a religious duty to do it," Rouhani said.



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Iranian president rejects criticism of coronavirus responseIran prohibits 'unnecessary' travel as expert warns 'millions' could die