

What Ankara expects from Washington after Idlib attacks

Sun, 2020-03-01 00:29

ANKARA: Turkey's losses in Syria's opposition-held northwestern Idlib province on Thursday night, and Ankara's subsequent request for assistance from its NATO allies, especially the US, has stirred concern over regional de-escalation.

So far, no Western ally has been willing to intervene in a conflict, which many consider is of Turkey's own making. Calls for NATO support may fall on deaf ears, though there is also some suggestion that a symbolic US deployment, perhaps in the form of reinforcing Incirlik airbase with Patriot missile batteries, could happen.

As the US does not have the legal authority to stop or shoot down Syrian warplanes targeting Turkish troops, Turkey recently asked Washington to deploy such batteries on its southern border against any future attacks from Syrian rockets.

"I think the US will give rhetorical support for Turkey – I'm just not sure it will give military support," Aaron Stein, a Turkey expert at the Foreign Policy Research Institute in Philadelphia, told Arab News.

According to Stein, any US action would be to defend Turkey, not to enable it to mount an offensive.

One of the key problems Turkey faces is that Russia controls the airspace over Idlib, which provides regime troops with a strategic gain over Turkish forces. In current circumstances, Russian President Vladimir Putin's brinkmanship with his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan may test the limits of their personal ties, and undermine any immediate search for political settlement.

"Right now, the main strategy of the US support is more verbal than concrete, and it is disconcerting that the (US) administration has been slow to respond to a crisis involving a NATO ally that has been escalating for several days," Jonathan Katz, a senior fellow at the German Marshall Fund of the United States, told Arab News.

"There are growing concerns in Washington about thousands of Syrians fleeing from Assad and Putin-directed attacks, and deep sympathy for Turkish troops killed or injured, but Erdogan should not expect US President Donald Trump to come to the rescue," Katz said.

According to Katz, the current developments are the result of significant US-Turkish relations fallout from Erdogan's foreign policy decisions over the last decade that have poisoned the waters among Ankara's Western partners, including his embrace of Putin and insistence on purchasing a Russian S400 air defense system – despite US and NATO objections.

"The US must go beyond diplomacy immediately to support Turkey, but it is essential for the Turkish people to hold a mirror up to their own leaders to better understand why President Erdogan put Turkey's security at risk with an unreliable partner like Putin," he said.

A high-level US delegation is expected to visit Turkey next week.

“Erdogan knows that Turkey cannot defeat Russia on its own,” Soner Cagaptay, director of the Turkish program at the Washington Institute, told Arab News. “Therefore, if he is going to escalate significantly, he wants to make sure he has the US support and at least the political backing of NATO allies.”

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Aaron Stein, Analyst

According to Cagaptay, that support can come in different forms, like intelligence support for targeting Syrian assets. Turkey reportedly destroyed a chemical weapons facility belonging to the regime 13 km south of Aleppo on Friday.

“But there could be even further support, like the US providing Patriot missiles to Turkey, and of course the ultimate (support) would be the US taking out Syria’s air defense system,” he said.

For Cagaptay, the last option would be significant because it would create a de facto no-fly zone over northern Syria.

“There is a clear asymmetry between Turkey and the regime forces. If the Syrian air defense system was taken out, that would give Turkey military superiority,” he said.

“So, Erdogan is perhaps going to push for Patriots, increased intelligence support, and political backing of NATO allies. That I think is the only way Turkey can stand up and push back. In the absence of that Turkey will have to take the deal that Putin has offered.”

According to Cagaptay, Putin probably calculated that Turkey’s NATO allies would not come to Ankara’s assistance in Syria, which could see a scenario where Syrian regime troops end up controlling the majority of Idlib’s territory, and Turkey receiving the majority of its civilian population as refugees, if that gamble proves correct.

The pressure that would place on EU allies would prove significant – already since Friday, 18,000 refugees have arrived on the Turkish border with Europe, with the number expected to reach as many as 30,000 in the upcoming days, as Erdogan facilitates their movement across Turkey to show Europe Syria is not Turkey’s problem to face alone.

“It all depends on Trump. I think Trump has surprised analysts and observers quite a few times. It would not be shocking this time either if Erdogan got what he wanted, which is significant US support. We have to wait and see.”





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Lawsuit accuses Trump and other US officials of crimes against
Palestinians Turkey raises migrant pressure on EU over Syria conflict

[Why water scarcity is a security risk for the Middle East](#)

Sat, 2020-02-29 23:49

DUBAI: In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, access to freshwater is a perennial quest.

Most countries have a limited supply of the precious resource, which is also under severe stress due to arid conditions, population growth, poor infrastructure and overexploitation.

Large expanses of MENA are hot and dry, with only two percent covered by wetlands, so water supply is poor to begin with. To compound the problem, countries are placing increased demands on their limited supplies.

Against this backdrop, a report conducted jointly by Good Judgement, a geopolitical and geo-economic forecasting entity, and the Dubai-based Arab Strategy Forum has tried to find out if water scarcity would heighten future security risks in the region.

The study, which looked at 11 global megatrends and forecasts for the next decade, presented findings by a group of "superforecasters" from around the world, who have proven to be "30 percent more accurate than 4,300 members of the US intelligence community."

According to the research, the overall probability that water scarcity would act as a pivot point in one or more regional conflicts over the next 10 years was fairly small, at 8 percent.

Kerry Anderson, a political risk consultant, says water concerns in the MENA region are more likely to stoke internal civil unrest and "exacerbate" other issues than cause cross-border conflict.

Describing water scarcity as potentially a "contributing factor in the escalation of hostilities" regionally, the Good Judgement report put the likelihood of a conflict between Jordan and Israel at only 1 percent.

The chances of war between Turkey and Iraq or Egypt and Ethiopia were both put at 3 percent, although the latter was considered to be among the more probable ones.

"(While) Egypt against Ethiopia is the only case where a more powerful downstream country may lose water, the report never says that a conflict may emerge considering the significant drought and deteriorating economic situation in Egypt," Anderson told Arab News.

With regard to the tensions between Turkey, Iraq and Syria, Anderson said water disputes were unlikely to be the cause of any future conflict involving the three countries.

"Iraq's government and military are not currently capable of launching the type of war against Turkey that would be necessary to force Turkey to change its policies," she added.

Anderson also points out that objections by Jordan and Iraq, to what they see as disproportionate extraction of water from shared resources respectively by Israel and Turkey, are unlikely to escalate into a conflict.

"The risk of a war over competing claims might be low, but the risk of water shortages and disputes contributing to political instability, protest movements and economic challenges is far greater."

For instance, rural families could be forced to leave unproductive farms and migrate to cities, which would contribute to increased social pressures on communities. In combination with corruption, water scarcity could worsen "inequalities," fueling unrest, Anderson said.

The risks for MENA countries due to water scarcity cannot be overstated. A report released last year by the World Resources Institute (WRI), said 12 of the 17 most water-stressed countries in the world were located in the MENA region.

In the WRI's "Aqueduct Water Risk Atlas," Qatar was ranked first, followed by Israel, Lebanon, Iran, Jordan, Libya, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Oman.

The scale of the challenge facing MENA governments can be gauged from the fact that in 2017, 17 out of 22 Arab League nations had more than half their populations living in urban areas.

Regional experts say the growth of urban areas in MENA countries is inevitable given that rural living was nearly impossible on arid land with marginal environments that could barely support subsistence agriculture.

The combination of increasing populations, especially in the cities, new municipalities and industrial units, rising living standards, and maintenance or expansion of irrigation systems, was putting additional pressure every year on already water-stressed countries.

In the past, the increasing demand on a limited supply of water had sparked strife, but in the future the same phenomenon could be a trigger for more migration and social unrest, according to Middle East observers.

Protests linked to water have repeatedly broken out in Iraq and Iran, and some experts have linked the Arab Spring uprisings to instability caused by droughts and heatwaves.

"There is substantial evidence that extreme, prolonged drought contributed to the causes of the Syrian civil war, partly by prompting a migration from rural areas to cities," Anderson said.

Waleed Zubari, coordinator of the water resources management program at the College of Graduate Studies in Manama, Bahrain, said close to 1 million people were affected by an extended drought in northeastern Syria between 2006 and 2009.

This mass displacement of people from their farms in search of refuge in cities contributed to the conditions that led to the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, Zubari added.

Competition for scarce water resources exist in Palestine as well, he said, noting that Israel had exercised full control over water resources in the West Bank since 1967, including supplies from the Jordan River and mountain aquifers.

Darfur in western Sudan was another example, according to Zubari, where climate variability, water scarcity and loss of fertile land aggravated the region's political problems, caused by ethnic tensions, to spark protracted civil war.

“Water is increasingly becoming an additional source of tension in an already unstable region,” he said, pointing out that it was now a national security priority for many Arab countries.

Given that 60 percent of the Middle East’s surface water originates from outside the region and almost all water basins are shared, the lack of management and planning in sharing these resources was likely to remain a source of political tensions.

Even so, Zubari added, water scarcity was an unlikely determinant of conflict in the Arab region if the past was any guide. “History also shows that power asymmetry in favor of the upstream or occupying countries is a major factor in avoiding conflict over water instigated by downstream countries.”

Put simply, even if water stress does not cause wars, across the Arab region factors such as population increase, economic growth and climate change will place ever greater strain on limited water resources and confront policy makers with daunting challenges.



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India, Pakistan water deal must be an ‘instrument of peace’As water scarcity affects millions, a Middle East foundation is making a difference

Lawsuit accuses Trump and other US officials of crimes against Palestinians

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Sat, 2020-02-29 23:00

WASHINGTON: A federal lawsuit filed in Washington, DC, last week by 13 Palestinian and American activists accuses US President Donald Trump and his Middle East adviser Jared Kushner of violating Palestinian civil and human rights.

Also named in the suit are Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu; New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo; Miriam Adelson, the wife of billionaire settler financier Sheldon Adelson; Israeli lobby group the The American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC); and 13 others.

Attorney Martin McMahon said the action targets Trump's "Deal of the Century," along with laws introduced in 28 American states that illegally deny Americans the right to boycott Israel.

Filed on behalf of 13 plaintiffs, including Palestinians living in America and in occupied Palestine, the lawsuit argues they were stripped of their legal and civil rights not only Israel but by American officials and activists empowered by a biased media and political system.

"I know the system in this country is biased against Palestinian rights, but I also know that the rule of law defends those rights," McMahon told Arab News. "With the power of the rule of law, we will prevail."

McMahon's lawsuit was filed during African American heritage month, which recognizes the civil rights struggles of black Americans who were enslaved and segregated under illegal laws and policies that stripped them of land rights, denied them citizenship and treated them as second-class citizens. These are all crimes that Palestinians are subjected to inside and outside of Israel as a result of American financial and political support.

"The Palestinian cause is very similar to the legal fight by African Americans and by Native Americans," said McMahon.

"The Nuremberg Trials of 1945 defined that war crimes were illegal, and that wanton destruction of property, extrajudicial killings, collective punishment and land theft are war crimes that fall under the umbrage of the Alien Tort Statute, which is what we use to defend these victims. There is no statute of limitations on these kinds of crimes."

The Alien Tort Statute is a US Federal law, adopted in 1789, that gives the federal courts jurisdiction to hear lawsuits filed by non-US citizens relating to actions committed in violation of international law.

McMahon confirmed that his 13 clients include American citizens and non-citizens who are living or lived under Israeli occupation. Among them are

three members of the Dawabsheh family, including an infant, who were murdered in a July 2015 arson attack in Hebron by Israeli settlers. Several other family members were seriously injured. Although the three Israeli Jewish arsonists were arrested, their actions were enabled by Israel's government, the lawsuit argues.

The plaintiffs also include Palestinian activists Ahed Al-Tamimi, her father Bassim Al-Tamimi and their extended family, who have been harassed, beaten and jailed by Israeli forces in the village of Nabi Salih for protesting against Israel's illegal policies. Their family lands were illegally confiscated by Israel.

Others are relatives of Abdul Rahman Barghouthi, who was murdered in Dec. 2016 by Israeli soldiers as he returned to his village, Aboud, near the Israeli settlement of Halamish. The Israeli media claimed Barghouthi attacked and injured an Israeli soldier but witnesses said he was killed in cold blood as a result of long-standing tensions between the village and the armed settlers.

McMahon explained that the lawsuit is based on four main principles. "Since 1948, (the) defendants have denationalized and dehumanized the Palestinian population, discriminating against them and denying them their legal rights," he said. "Individuals who contribute money or political support to this illegal system are accomplices. We are suing all of the Americans who have aided and abetted the denationalization of the Palestinian people."

The second principle, he said, is that Americans have a right to choose to boycott Israel over its apartheid practices that violate international law. The third seeks to declare Netanyahu, who has been Israel's prime minister for a total of 16 years, a war criminal based on his policies in Gaza and the West Bank.

The fourth principle, McMahon said, involves the illegality of the Trump administration's "Deal of the Century," which seeks to give Israel personal property and lands owned by Palestinians and occupied in conflict.

"That is illegal under both international law and American law," he said. "And because Americans are engaged in this with Israelis, it makes them liable for these actions."

McMahon said that despite the difficulty of challenging Israel in the pro-Israel American judicial system, he has had some success; most recently in a lawsuit filed in 2016 that also involves the Al-Tamimi family, American officials, and individuals and companies that have financed or support Israel's illegal settlements.

"That lawsuit also addresses an injustice against the Palestinians, and it was initially thrown out by the Federal Court," McMahon said. "But it was reinstated by the US Federal Appeals Court because we have the weight of the law on our side."

McMahon said Jewish Americans have filed many lawsuits against Palestinian organizations and individuals asserting terrorism, violence and loss of property rights, but the time in which US courts only entertain pro-Israel lawsuits has ended.

"My law firm won't sit back," he said. "We will defend the legal rights of Palestinians or Americans. Anyone who feels they have been denied their rights should contact my office and I will include them in the lawsuit."

The other 13 defendants in the lawsuit are AIPAC officials Brian Shankman and

Howard Kohr, international attorney Gustaff Cardelius, US Ambassador to Israel David Friedman, housing investor Daniel Gilbert, former Senate Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, Trump legal adviser and former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani, Trump adviser Jason Greenblatt, New York City Council member Donald Hikind, former Arkansas Governor Michael Huckabee, Israel Defense Forces activist Susan Levin-Abir, former Palestinian terrorist and now celebrated pro-Israel advocate Walid Shoebat, and University of Haifa Chairman Dov Weissglas.



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Palestinians rally against Trump plan amid struggle at UN
Palestinians consider next step in opposition to US plan

UN agency says 35 migrants rescued off Libyan coast

Author:

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CAIRO: A commercial ship has rescued 35 Europe-bound migrants off Libya's Mediterranean coast and returned them to the capital, Tripoli, the UN migration agency said.

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) tweeted that migrants, who were intercepted on Thursday, were given medical assistance and relief items upon disembarkation.

"Saving lives at sea is a moral and legal obligation. It is however unacceptable that migrants continue to be returned to an unsafe port," said the IOM.

Libya, which descended into chaos following the 2011 uprising that toppled and killed longtime ruler Muammar Qaddafi, has emerged as a major transit point for African and Arab migrants fleeing war and poverty to Europe. Most migrants make the perilous journey in ill-equipped and unsafe rubber boats. As of last October, roughly 19,000 migrants have drowned or disappeared on the sea route since 2014, according to IOM.

FASTFACT

Libya, which descended into chaos following the 2011 uprising has emerged as a major transit point for African and Arab migrants fleeing war and poverty to Europe.

Last week, a rubber dinghy packed with 91 migrants that set out from Libyan shores for Europe, apparently went missing in international waters in the Mediterranean Sea after leaving Libya on Feb. 8.

In recent years, the EU has partnered with the coast guard and other Libyan forces to stop the flow of migrants. Rights groups say those efforts have left migrants at the mercy of brutal armed groups or confined in squalid detention centers that lack adequate food and water.

The latest developments come amid criticism of the EU's lack of rescue missions in the Mediterranean Sea. Member countries agreed earlier this month to end an anti-migrant smuggler operation involving only surveillance aircraft and instead deploy military ships to concentrate on upholding a widely flouted UN arms embargo that's considered key to winding down Libya's relentless war.



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Turkey, Russia talk on Syria as migrants rush Greek border Spain rescues 24, continues search for 53 migrants at sea

[Virus spreading worldwide as more countries report first cases](#)

Author:

Sat, 2020-02-29 02:29

DUBAI, GENEVA: The rapid spread of coronavirus raised fears of a pandemic on Friday, with five countries reporting their first cases, the World Health Organization (WHO) warning it could spread worldwide and Switzerland canceling the giant Geneva car show.

“The outbreak is getting bigger,” WHO spokesman Christian Lindmeier told a news briefing in Geneva.

“The scenario of the coronavirus reaching multiple countries, if not all countries around the world, is something we have been looking at and warning against since quite a while.”

The outbreak of the new virus in Iran has been dramatic – the head of Iran’s

task force to stop the illness, known as COVID-19, was seen coughing, sweating and wheezing across televised interviews before acknowledging he was infected. Then days later, a visibly pale official sat only meters away from President Hassan Rouhani and other top leaders before she too reportedly came down with the virus.

Iran's success – or failure – in combating the virus will have an impact far beyond the country's 80 million people as the majority of cases in the Mideast now link back to Iran.

"All organizations are trying their best to combat this virus," Health Ministry spokesman Kianoush Jahanpour said.

On Friday, Jahanpour again reported a huge spike in cases, saying there were now 388 confirmed coronavirus cases in Iran and 34 deaths. In brief remarks from Tehran, he cautioned the number of cases would likely further spike as Iran now has 15 laboratories testing samples.

In Tehran and other cities, authorities canceled Friday prayer services to limit crowds. In the capital, Radio Tehran that typically carries the prayer played only traditional Iranian music. Universities are to remain closed another week.

Questions still remain over Iran's count. Experts, including at the WHO, worry the Islamic republic may be underreporting the number of cases in the country.

Germany

There are almost 60 confirmed cases of coronavirus in Germany, a spokeswoman for the Health Ministry said on Friday, adding that number included people who were now healthy again.

Asked how many confirmed cases of coronavirus in Germany there were, she said: "At the moment in Germany we have almost 60 but it's a very dynamic situation, as we keep saying."

Lebanon

Lebanon announced on Friday it would bar entry to nonresident foreigners from the four countries most affected by the coronavirus outbreak, a day after announcing its third case.

The Middle Eastern country will deny entry to people arriving from China, South Korea, Iran and Italy, the state news agency reported, without saying when the measure would come into effect.

All airlines operating flights to Beirut have been notified of the ban, which does not affect Lebanese citizens or foreigners holding a residency permit, the agency added.

Lebanon's Health Ministry on Thursday confirmed another coronavirus case. All three individuals infected – two Lebanese and an Iranian – arrived recently from Iran, the worst-hit country in the region. Despite government efforts to reassure the Lebanese, videos have circulated on social media denouncing what users say are insufficient screenings for the virus at Beirut's international airport.

Nigeria

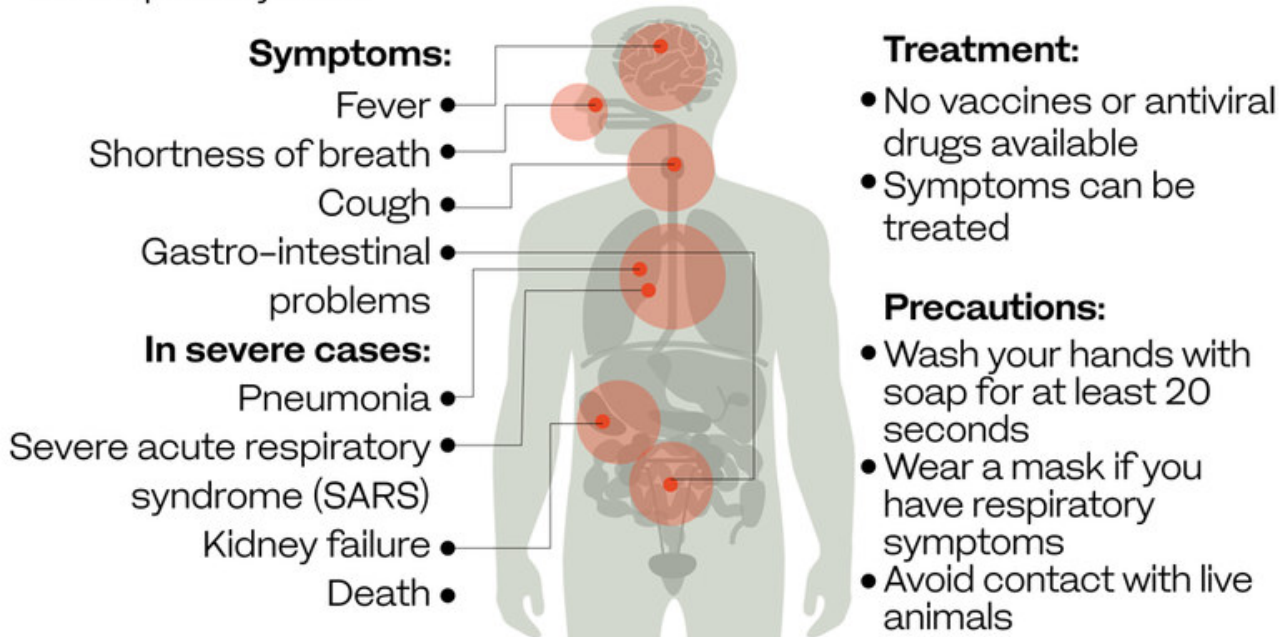
Nigerian authorities on Friday reported the first confirmed case of the new coronavirus in sub-Saharan Africa as the outbreak spread to a region with some of the world's weakest health systems.

The health commissioner for Lagos, Africa's largest city with more than 20 million people, said an Italian citizen who entered Nigeria on Tuesday from Milan on a business trip fell ill the next day. Commissioner Akin Abayomi said the man was clinically stable with no serious symptoms. Abayomi said officials were working to identify all of the man's contacts since he arrived in Nigeria. Lagos state early this month advised people arriving from virus-affected areas to observe 14 days of self-quarantine while monitoring for any symptoms. Nigerian health officials have been strengthening measures to ensure that any outbreak in Lagos is contained quickly, Abayomi said in a statement.

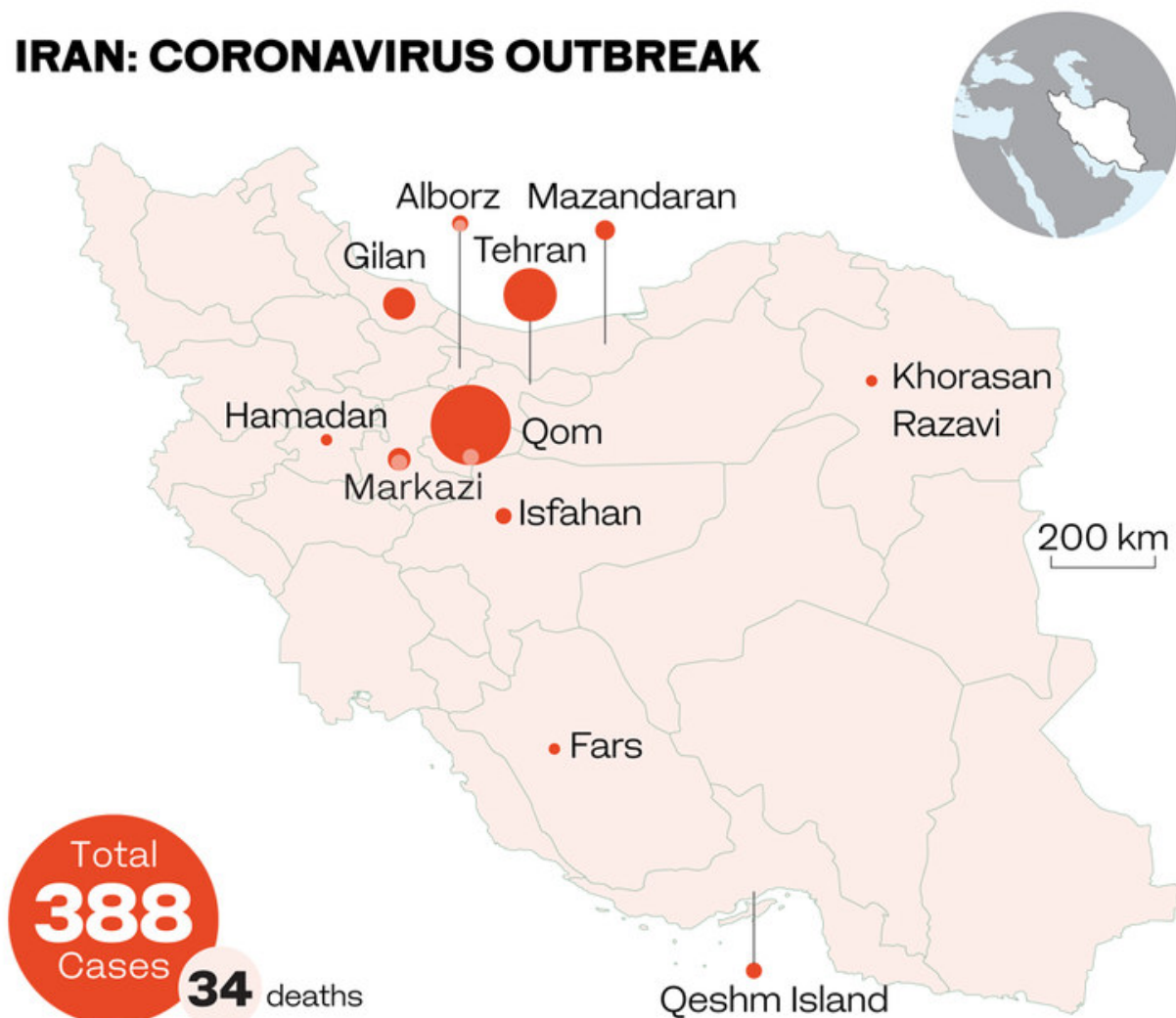
He urged Lagos residents to take measures such as keeping their distance from people who are coughing and washing their hands regularly.

WHAT IS THE CORONAVIRUS?

The 2019 Novel Coronavirus (2019-nCoV) is a member of the coronaviruses family, which originates from animals and typically affects the respiratory tract



IRAN: CORONAVIRUS OUTBREAK



Source: AFP and other agencies

Cases of the virus were confirmed in Egypt and Algeria in north Africa in recent days. Until then, some global health experts had expressed surprise that no cases had been reported in Africa.

It was concerns about the virus spreading to countries with weaker health systems that led the World Health Organization to declare the outbreak a global health emergency.

Nigeria is one of 13 African countries that WHO classified as high priority in this outbreak because of direct links to China or a high number of visitors from there.

On Thursday, word spread that one of Iran's many vice presidents, Masoumeh Ebtekar, had contracted the virus. Ebtekar, 59, is better known as "Sister Mary," the English-speaking spokeswoman for the students who seized the US Embassy in Tehran in 1979 and sparked the 444-day hostage crisis.

Ebtekar on Wednesday attended a Cabinet meeting chaired by Rouhani, 71. Other top officials, most in their late 50s and 60s, sat within several meters (feet) from her as well. Jahanpour, the Health Ministry spokesman, said the average age of those killed by the virus and the illness it brings is over 60.

State media has not said what measures those attending the meeting with Ebtekar were now taking. However, the concern about the virus' spread among Iran's elite has reached into Austria, where Foreign Minister Alexander Schallenberg tested negative for it after a recent trip to Tehran.

Worries persist over Shiite shrines remaining open in the country. Saudi Arabia on Thursday took the unprecedented decision to close off the holiest sites in Islam to foreign pilgrims over the coronavirus, disrupting travel for thousands of Muslims already headed to the kingdom and potentially affecting plans later this year for millions more ahead of the fasting month of Ramadan and the annual Hajj pilgrimage.

Some Iranian clerics also have offered advice with no basis in science, like Sheikh Abbas Tabrizian in Qom who told followers to give themselves a suppository of essential oils to ward off the virus.

Elsewhere, a major cycling race in the United Arab Emirates was canceled early Friday after two Italians tested positive for the new virus, setting off a quarantine that also ensnared four-time Tour de France winner Chris Froome of Britain. That pushed the overall number of confirmed cases to 21 in the UAE, a federation of seven sheikhdoms on the Arabian Peninsula.

In Cairo, authorities allowed a plane carrying 114 Chinese tourists into Egypt despite EgyptAir halting flights to China amid the outbreak. The tourists showed no symptoms of the virus and will be monitored during their weeklong vacation, said officials who spoke on condition of anonymity as they were not authorized to speak to journalists.

Lebanon has flights and barred citizens of China, Iran, Italy and South Korea from visiting the country, though Lebanese citizens and residents will be allowed back in. Qatar separately flew home its citizens from Iran and put them in a 14-day quarantine.

The Iran government's slow response and the unrelenting pressure Iranians face, especially as the country's rial currency this week hit its lowest value in a year against the US dollar, has seen many Iranians turn to dark humor. Jokes spread fast across social media, including one saying a government that previously cracked down on demonstrators now will lock up the

virus.

Then come the videos. Iraj Harirchi, who led Iran's coronavirus task force, sweated at the podium during a news conference and then later coughed all over the set of a state TV interview program, its female host looking down and away.

"I came from a cold place," Harirchi said, attempting to joke before bringing the crook of his arm to his face. "I made a mistake. I should cover my mouth like this."

Soon afterward, Harirchi acknowledged testing positive for the virus.



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