

Syria sees COVID-19 spike but grim state of economy limits lockdown options

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Thu, 2021-03-04 15:02

DAMASCUS: Syria has seen a sharp rise in COVID-19 infections since mid-February but lockdown options remain limited due to the country's dire economic situation, a member of the country's coronavirus advisory committee said on Thursday.

"Starting February 10th or around that time we started seeing a spike in cases," Dr. Nabough al-Awa told Reuters.

"I don't have accurate percentages as I'm only one doctor... but I also talk to my colleagues. If I was seeing in my clinic two or three cases a day last year now I am seeing five or six."

The health ministry did not immediately respond to a request for comment on Thursday.

On Monday it started administering COVID-19 vaccinations to frontline healthcare workers and said the country was experiencing a rise in infections. It gave no further details.

Syria has officially recorded a total of 15,753 cases and 1,045 deaths since the start of the pandemic. Actual numbers are expected to be much higher owing to the government's limited testing capability.

The government imposed a nationwide curfew when the pandemic first hit last year but restaurants, shops and schools re-opened as that lockdown was gradually eased starting from May. Mask wearing is required in government offices and on crowded public transport.

One relief worker said the number of people seeking oxygen tanks spiked around a week ago but was now stabilising again.

Several schools in Damascus have had to shut classes in the past week due to the rise in cases amongst students.

Online learning remains difficult in a conflict-ridden country where internet and electricity supply is not stable.

Awa said adding to the problem was the fact that most schools in Syria don't have access to functional bathrooms, and soap and sanitation facilities, which if provided could decrease the number of infections.

"These things could help reduce numbers if closure is difficult," Awa said.

"It's still not too late to act but the problem is we have to admit that we are being subjected to a severe spike."



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[Pope Francis' visit to give hope and comfort to Iraqis of all faiths](#)

Thu, 2021-03-04 19:35

ROME / MEXICO CITY: Pope Francis, the head of the Roman Catholic Church, will become the first pontiff ever to set foot in Iraq, where he hopes to encourage the dwindling Christian community to remain in their ancient homeland while also extending a hand of friendship to the Islamic world.

The three-day "pilgrimage" comes despite a recent spike in coronavirus cases in Iraq and an upsurge in violence. Francis arrives just days after a rocket attack on the Ain al-Assad base in Iraq's western desert, which hosts US-led coalition troops.

One civilian contractor was killed in Wednesday's barrage, which the US has blamed on Iran-backed militias. Benedict XVI, who resigned as pontiff eight years ago, warned in an interview on Monday that the visit is "a dangerous trip: for reasons of security and for coronavirus."

IRAQ ITINERARY OF POPE FRANCIS



PRESIDENTIAL
PALACE

5 MARCH
FRIDAY AFTERNOON
(Arrival at Baghdad
International Airport)

1. Presidential palace in Baghdad —
Meeting with president
and prime minister as well as other
government officials

**2. Syriac Catholic Cathedral of
Our Lady of Salvation** in
Baghdad — Meeting with bishops,
priests and other
Christian figures at church attacked
by bombers in 2010

ARAB NEWS

IRAQ ITINERARY OF POPE FRANCIS



NAJAF

6 MARCH
SATURDAY MORNING:
(Flight from Baghdad to Najaf)

1. Najaf — Visit to Grand Ayatollah Ali
Al-Sistani

(Flight from Najaf to Nassiriya)

2. Plain of Ur — Interreligious
meeting in the homeland of the
biblical patriarch Abraham

(Flight from Nassiriya to Baghdad)

SATURDAY AFTERNOON:
**Chaldean Cathedral of Saint
Joseph** in Baghdad — Holy Mass

Confirming the visit was still going ahead in his weekly address on Wednesday, Francis said: "For a long time I have wanted to meet these people who have suffered so much. I ask you to accompany this apostolic journey with your prayers so that it may take place in the best possible way and bear the hoped-for fruits.

"The Iraqi people are waiting for us, they were waiting for Saint John Paul II, who was forbidden to go. One cannot disappoint a people for the second time. Let us pray that this journey will be successful."

This is Francis' first trip abroad in about 15 months due to the coronavirus

pandemic and subsequent restrictions on movement. Although the 84-year-old Argentine pontiff and his entourage have all been vaccinated against COVID-19, no such inoculation campaign has taken place in Iraq. The majority of the country will be under strict lockdown during his visit and movement between provinces will be restricted.

On Tuesday, a spokesman for the pope said he would be traveling in an armored vehicle – not his usual white ‘popemobile’ – and that he would not be meeting crowds, except those attending Mass in the northern Kurdish city of Erbil on Sunday.



INTERNATIONAL VISITS

2013

- Brazil

2014

- Israel
- Jordan
- Palestine
- South Korea
- Albania
- France
- Turkey

2015

- Sri Lanka
- Philippines
- Bosnia and Herzegovina
- Bolivia
- Ecuador
- Paraguay
- United States
- Cuba
- Mexico
- Greece

- Poland
- Sweden
- Egypt
- Portugal
- Colombia

2018

- Chile
- Peru
- Ireland
- Panama
- United Arab Emirates
- Morocco
- Romania
- Mozambique
- Madagascar
- Mauritius
- Thailand
- Japan

2021

- Iraq

ARAB NEWS

“This is a particular situation, that’s why the transports will all be in a closed vehicle, meaning it will be complicated to see the pope on the streets,” Matteo Brunei, the spokesman, said in a press briefing attended by Arab News. “There will be a number of meetings but none will be more than a

few hundred people.”

Francis touches down in Baghdad on Friday, where he will be welcomed at the airport by Mustafa Al-Kadhimi, the Iraqi prime minister, in the first meeting between a pope and an Iraqi PM since 2008.

He will then head to the presidential palace for a private meeting with President Barham Salih, who will introduce him to local political and religious authorities. Salih has met the pope in Rome on two occasions: the first time on Nov. 24, 2018, and against on Jan. 25 last year.



Pope Francis begins his historic trip to war-scarred Iraq tomorrow, defying security concerns and the coronavirus pandemic to comfort one of the world’s oldest and most persecuted Christian communities. (AFP)

In the afternoon, Francis will meet with the Christian community at the Syrian Catholic Cathedral of Our Lady of Perpetual Help, where at least 47 Christians died in a Daesh attack in 2010. At the church, restored in 2012, he will be welcomed by Patriarch Joseph Younan.

Perhaps the most keenly anticipated leg of the visit falls on Saturday, when Francis travels to Najaf, the shrine city where Imam Ali, the fourth Islamic caliph, is buried. Here Francis will meet with the 90-year-old Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani, the spiritual leader of Iraq’s Shiites.

Francis became the first pope to visit the Arabian Peninsula two years ago when he met with Sunni cleric Sheikh Ahmed al-Tayeb, the grand imam of Al-Azhar, in Abu Dhabi. There, the two faith leaders signed a document on “human fraternity for world peace” and issued a joint call for freedom of belief.

THENUMBER

1,445 km

*** Distance Pope Francis will cover within Iraq by plane and helicopter.**

Saturday's visit to Najaf will be the first face-to-face meeting between a Catholic pontiff and a Shiite ayatollah. The meeting at Al-Sistani's modest home is billed as "a courtesy visit" – so no joint declaration is expected, although a verbal statement is likely. It will nevertheless mark a symbolic moment whereby the pope extends a hand of friendship to the other main branch of Islam.

There are significant geopolitical undertones, however. Al-Sistani is widely seen as a counterweight to Iran's influence in Iraq and among Shiites as a whole. By meeting with him, Francis is effectively recognizing Sistani as the pre-eminent voice of Shiite Islam over his powerful rival, Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.

Al-Sistani commands immense respect among Iraq's Shiite majority. Thousands of young men heeded his 2014 fatwa to take up arms against Daesh when the group made lightning advances in the country's north. His sermons, often delivered through representatives, can have far-reaching political consequences.

A show of solidarity from Al-Sistani now might also give Iraq's Christians a measure of protection from Iraq's marauding Shiite militias, which have terrorized Christian families and prevented many from returning home from internal displacement.



Iraqi Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein holds a press conference at the Babylon Hotel in the capital Baghdad, on March 4, 2021, on the eve of the first papal visit to the country. (AFP)

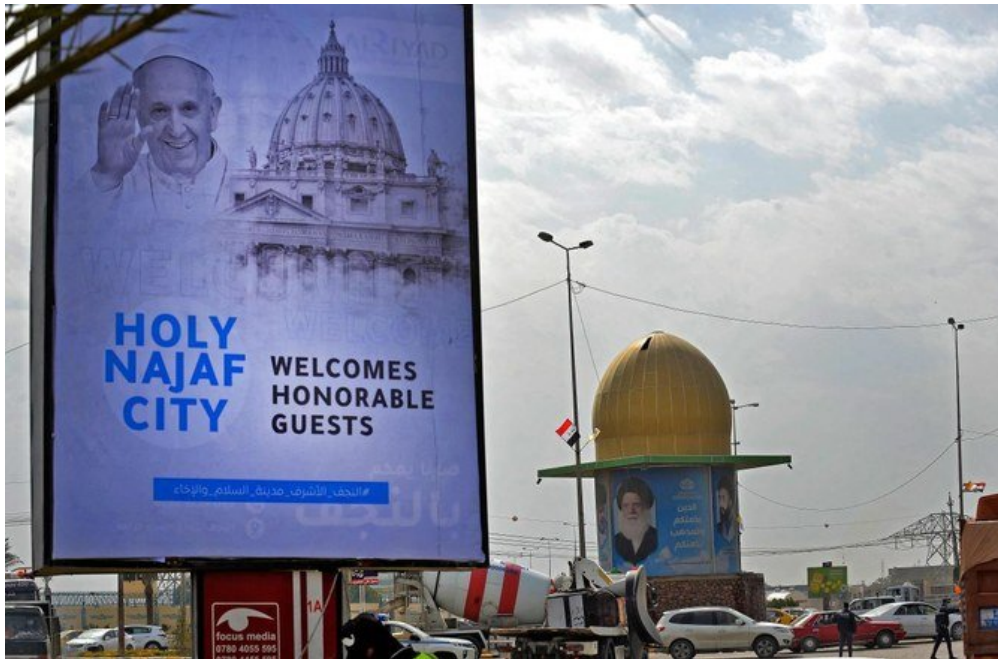
Following his meeting with Al-Sistani, Francis will visit the ancient city of Ur in the present-day southern province of Dhi Qar, considered in the Bible to be Abraham's birthplace.

There, an interreligious meeting is scheduled with representatives of all faiths present in Iraq, including the Yazidis – an ancient culture brought to brink of annihilation by Daesh fanatics when the militant group launched a campaign of slaughter and rape in their homeland of Sinjar in August 2014.

On Saturday afternoon, Francis will celebrate Mass in Baghdad's Chaldean cathedral – a first in the Chaldean rite for a pontiff of the Catholic Church – together with Cardinal Louis Raphael Sako, patriarch of the Chaldeans.

READ MORE

Pope Francis said in a video message on Thursday that he wants to be seen by the Iraqi people as a “penitent pilgrim” asking God for “forgiveness and reconciliation after years of war and terrorism,” and for “consolation of hearts and the healing of wounds.” [More here.](#)



On Sunday Francis will then reach Erbil, capital of Iraqi Kurdistan, where he will be welcomed by the autonomous region's President Nechirvan Barzani and Prime Minister Masrour Barzani. Although security is far better in Erbil compared to other Iraqi cities, Western targets came under rocket attack there in mid-February.

The Sunni Muslim-majority Kurdistan Region has long been considered a sanctuary for Iraq's persecuted ethno-religious minorities. During the war with Daesh, tens of thousands of Christians and Yazidis fled to hastily built displacement camps behind Peshmerga lines. Slow reconstruction efforts and ongoing security concerns have left many waiting impatiently to return.

IRAQ ITINERARY OF POPE FRANCIS



7 MARCH
SUNDAY MORNING:
(Flight from Baghdad to Erbil)

1. Erbil Airport — meeting with religious and civil authorities of the Autonomous Region of Iraq
Kurdistan

(Helicopter from Erbil to Mosul)

2. Hosh Al-Bieaa (Church Square) in Mosul — Prayer of suffrage for the victims of war with Daesh

(Helicopter from Mosul to Qaraqosh)

3. Church of Immaculate Conception in the Christian city of Qaraqosh — meeting the community at the restored church, which was badly damaged by Daesh

(Transfer from Qaraqosh to Erbil)

SUNDAY AFTERNOON:
4. Franso Hariri Stadium in Erbil — homily to Christian community

(Flight from Erbil to Baghdad)

8 MARCH
MONDAY MORNING:
5. Baghdad International Airport — Farewell ceremony

ARAB NEWS

From Erbil, Francis will fly by helicopter to Nineveh's provincial capital Mosul, which from 2014 to 2017 was the de facto capital of Daesh's self-proclaimed caliphate. Huge areas of the once flourishing commercial hub were leveled in the US-led coalition's flight to reclaim the city, and many of its precious religious artifacts were vandalized by Daesh fanatics.

Here Francis will pray to honor the victims in the Square of the Four Churches — Syro-Catholic, Syriac Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox and Chaldean. Francis will be welcomed there by Mosul's Archbishop Najib Mikhael Moussa and the local governor.

He will then fly by helicopter to Qaraqosh, a Christian-majority city where

on Aug. 6-7, 2014, about 45,000 people were expelled by Daesh hordes. He will say the Angelus Sunday prayer in the Church of the Immaculate Conception, which was badly damaged by Daesh and used as a shooting range.

Mass at Franso Hariri stadium in Erbil will be Francis' last appointment in Iraq. He is then scheduled to fly back to Rome from Baghdad on Monday.



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Vatican mints medal for Pope Francis's Iraq visit
Pope in video message to Iraqis on eve of visit
Preparations in full swing for pope's meeting with Ali Al-Sistani
Pope says will make Iraq trip despite rocket attack

US, at UN, accuses Russia of blocking 'accountability' on Syria chemical weapons

Thu, 2021-03-04 19:25

UNITED NATIONS: The new US envoy to the United Nations on Thursday accused Russia of seeking to stymie efforts to hold the government of Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad accountable for its use of chemical weapons during its long civil war.

"We all know the Assad regime has repeatedly used chemical weapons. So why hasn't the Syrian government been held accountable?" the ambassador, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, told a Security Council meeting via videoconference.

"The answer is sadly simple: the Assad regime has tried to avoid accountability by obstructing independent investigations and undermining the role and work" of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), she said.

"And the regime's allies, in particular Russia, have also sought to block all efforts to pursue accountability," added the US diplomat, who was participating in her first Security Council meeting since taking over as President Joe Biden's envoy.

"Russia has defended the Assad regime despite its chemical weapons attacks, it has attacked the professional work of the OPCW, and it has undermined efforts to hold the Assad regime accountable for its use of chemical weapons and numerous other atrocities."

Moscow's UN envoy, Vassily Nebenzia, defended Damascus, saying: "On Russia's advice, Syria has abided by the OPCW in good faith, and has gotten rid of its chemical weapons arsenal" – a claim greeted with skepticism in the West.

He also mocked Thomas-Greenfield, who holds the council's rotating presidency for March, for being a bit wordy in what was meant to be a "brief" intervention to start the proceedings.

"We all always try to be brief, but it's not always possible," he said before launching into what he called "a brief and useful historical recap on Council deliberations" – seemingly chiding Thomas-Greenfield for being a newbie.

According to the United Nations, which has accused Assad's regime of carrying out chemical attacks against its own citizens in the past, Damascus has for years not replied to a series of 19 questions about its weapons installations, which could have been used to stock or produce chemical weapons.

OPCW investigators have accused Assad's regime of sarin gas and chlorine attacks in Syria in 2017.



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[chemical weapons](#)

Emotional scenes as UN General Assembly hears of human rights abuses in Syria
Syrian victims of chemical strikes file case with French prosecutors

[Nine Turkish soldiers killed in helicopter crash](#)

Thu, 2021-03-04 18:31

ISTANBUL: Nine Turkish soldiers were killed and four others wounded when their military helicopter crashed in the southeast of the country on Thursday, the defence ministry said.

Television images from the crash site showed the ground blanketed in snow and visibility hampered by thick clouds in the mountainous region.

Ruling AKP party lawmaker Tolga Agar, who sits of parliament's defence

committee, tweeted that Lieutenant General Osman Erbas was among the dead. Erbas is officially listed as the head of the Turkish army's 8th Corps. The defence ministry did not immediately confirm the senior commander's death in a statement which said contact with the helicopter was lost in the Bitlis province 30 minutes after it took off.

"Nine heroic soldiers fell as martyrs and four were injured in the accident," the defence ministry said, adding that the injured were being transported to hospital.

"I pray for Allah's mercy for our nine martyrs... Our pain is great," Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's spokesman Ibrahim Kalin tweeted.

Turkish media reports said Defence Minister Hulusi Akar and Interior Minister Suleyman Soylu were both travelling to the site of the crash.

The defence ministry said the accident involved a Cougar helicopter but provided no details about the model.

The Cougar family of multi-purpose helicopters were developed by France and are now produced by Airbus.

The accident occurred in a region where Turkish forces regularly conduct military operations against outlawed Kurdish militias.

In 2017, a military helicopter crashed in the southeastern Sirnak province near Turkey's border with Syria and Iraq, killing 13 soldiers.



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[helicopter](#)

Turkey says it may negotiate maritime demarcation with Egypt if conditions allow Turkey, Oman and Bahrain among 'bondfire' fragile five

Sudan to start vaccine rollout next week after getting COVAX doses

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Thu, 2021-03-04 13:17

KHARTOUM: Sudan will begin vaccinating health care workers followed by people aged 45 or older with chronic conditions for free next week after becoming the first country in the Middle East and North Africa to benefit from COVAX facility vaccines.

Sudan received 828,000 doses of the AstraZeneca-produced vaccine on Wednesday at Khartoum airport, a health ministry official said. The delivery follows that of 4.5 metric tons of syringes and disposal boxes through COVAX in late February.

Sudan says it expects to receive the remainder of a total 3.4 million doses through COVAX, a vaccine-sharing program co-led by the World Health Organization, in the second quarter of this year.

It aims to cover 20% of its population of 44 million through COVAX by September, health ministry officials said.

"This is an essential part of our battle against coronavirus," Health Minister Omer Elnageib said.

Sudan was also in initial discussions to produce the vaccine domestically, Elnageib added.

Sudan is a young country, with only about 4% of its population over the age of 65, according to UN statistics.

It has been suffering from a long economic crisis that has left it unable to import some basic medicines and its health care system suffered from decades of neglect and sanctions under former President Omar Al-Bashir before his overthrow in 2019.

As of March 1, Sudan had officially recorded 28,545 cases of coronavirus since the start of the pandemic one year ago, including 1,895 deaths.





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US warship arrives at Sudan port day after Russian Navy frigate docks Saudi aid agency delivers aid in Sudan, Yemen