

Coronavirus Raging Out of Control in Middle East



Iraq's health ministry has warned of "dire consequences" because citizens are not following coronavirus prevention measures.

BAGHDAD (Dispatches) – Iraq's health ministry has warned of "dire consequences" because citizens are not following coronavirus prevention measures as the country reported a new high in daily infection rates.

Iraq recorded 8,331 new coronavirus cases on Wednesday, the highest figure since the ministry began keeping records at the onset of the pandemic last year. That figure was double the number of new infections from last month, and well above the previous peak of some 6,000 in March.

Death rates are still fairly low

relative to new infections. At least 14,606 people have died, from a total of 903,439 cases.

The severe spike in case numbers prompted the health ministry to issue a grave warning in a statement on Thursday, saying the rise was due to laxity among Iraqis who flout preventive measures.

Turkey has also posted record daily numbers of confirmed COVID-19 cases for the past 10 days, including 55,941 new infections reported late Thursday.

Keen to minimize the pandemic's repercussions for Turkey's ailing economy, President

Recep Tayyip Erdogan eased infection-control measures in early March. The recent spike forced him to announce renewed restrictions, such as weekend lockdowns and the closure of cafes and restaurants during Ramadan, starting on April 13.

Turkish medical groups say the reopening in March was premature and that the new measures won't go far enough to curb the surge. They have called for a full lockdown during the holy Muslim month.

"Every single day the number of cases is increasing. Every

single day the number of deaths is increasing. The alarm bells are ringing for the intensive care units," Ismail Cinel, head of the Turkish Intensive Care Association, said.

The Health Ministry has said that around 75 percent of the recent infections in Turkey involve the more contagious variant first identified in Britain.

Meanwhile, Qatar announced tighter COVID-19-related restrictions amidst a rising number of cases in the last few weeks.

The measures, announced in a cabinet statement on Wednesday, came into effect on Friday as the country battles a surge in new COVID-19 infections.

On Wednesday, the country reported 940 new cases, taking the total number of positive cases to more than 186,000 since the start of the pandemic.

The circulation of coronavirus variants first identified in the UK and South Africa has contributed to the spread of COVID-19, according to Abdullatif Al Khal, the deputy chief medical officer of Hamad Medical Corporation.

The UAE has also recorded 1,875 new coronavirus cases after conducting 244,357 tests, state news agency WAM reported.

The total number of infections in the country now stands at 480,006 since the pandemic began, the health ministry said.

It added that three people died from coronavirus complications, raising the number of fatalities to 1,526.

the number increasing by 700 over the past week — a 20% rise.

Neighboring Poland is also seeing a dramatic spike in deaths, and hospitals have been forced to turn away cancer and other patients as ICU and other hospital beds are taken by COVID-19 patients. Hospitalizations of virus patients there have jumped 20% in the past two weeks.

Harris, from the WHO, says the world knows how to fight these surges. She said good news was coming out of the UK — which saw new coronavirus cases drop 60% in March amid a strong vaccination program — "that indeed the vaccination programs have averted very large numbers of deaths. But we have to do it all."

"We have to keep on social distancing. We have to avoid indoor crowded settings. We have to keep wearing the masks, even if vaccinated," she said. "People are misunderstanding, seeming to think that vaccination will stop transmission. That is not the case. We need to bring down the transmission while giving the vaccination the chance to stop the severe disease."

Iran...

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"The Islamic Republic of Iran, as a country with long coasts in the Persian Gulf and the Sea of Oman, emphasizes the full observance of maritime regulations, including the regulations on environmental protection, and monitors and follows up any violations in this regard," he added.

On January 4, the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC)'s Navy said the South Korean-flagged MT Hankuk Chemi tanker had been detained upon a request by Iran's Ports and Maritime Organization and a verdict by the office of Hormozgan province's prosecutor.

Carrying 20 crew members, the ship was sailing through the Strait of Hormuz when it was impounded for causing water pollution. It was headed to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) after loading 7,200 tonnes of oil chemical products in Saudi Arabia.

In February, the crew of the tanker received permission to leave Iran in a humanitarian move, but they remained on the ship for maintenance purposes.

The release of the tanker was first announced by South Korea's Foreign Ministry earlier on Friday, when it said the ship and its captain and 12 crew members had left the port near Bandar Abbas on the southern coast at around 6 a.m. in Iran's time.

South Korea had tried to suggest that the detention was linked to Tehran's anger over Seoul's refusal to release about \$7 billion of Iranian assets locked in South Korean banks due to US sanctions, but Iran had maintained all along that the decision was purely a "technical issue" related to the Iranian Judiciary.

The tanker's release came a day after Iran's Central Bank Governor Abdolnaser Hemmati stated that nothing new has happened with regard to Iran's money being held in South Korean banks.

"The Central Bank is responsible for the money, and nothing has happened in this regard yet, and of course the use of these resources is the right of the Islamic Republic of Iran," he said.

"The \$7 billion of blocked assets in South Korea must be released as soon as possible, and we will definitely sue for damages," he added.

While Tehran has been pressing Seoul to unlock its money, South Korea said in February that Iran's money will be released only after consultations with the U.S. government.

"The actual unfreezing of the assets will be carried out through consultations with related countries, including the United States," South Korea's Foreign Ministry said on February 24.

Rouhani...

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during a video conference call on Thursday during a ceremony to inaugurate five national knowledge-based and innovative projects.

Rouhani cited U.S. officials' admission of the failure of the so-called maximum pressure policy and said the whole world, as well as the new U.S. administration, acknowledges that the policy has brought about a harsh defeat for Washington.

He said importing vaccines is not an easy job to do, stressing that "wherever there is a vaccine, we immediately provide money to purchase it."

"I want to say that this is not a simple matter," he said. "The administration, the Health Ministry and the Central Bank have taken all the necessary measures ... and I stress that nothing comes before the issue of vaccines for us."

The president noted that Iran has bought

16.8 million doses of vaccines via the World Health Organization's COVAX global vaccine scheme, which is being gradually imported into the country.

Iran was among the front-runners in placing an early order to purchase vaccines, he said.

According to President Rouhani, Iran encountered numerous problems in transferring money to buy vaccines from the COVAX initiative. "We have money in foreign banks, but they are all frozen up by US sanctions," he said.

FM...

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the importance of ties between the two neighboring countries. For his part, Berdimuhamedov voiced his support for bilateral ties in political, economic and cultural spheres.

He also highlighted his country's determination to expand bilateral relations.

Zarif visited Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan before heading to Turkmenistan as the last leg of his tour aimed at enhancing bilateral and regional cooperation.

In a tweet on Thursday evening, Zarif wrote that he concluded his Central Asian tour with a "superb" visit to Turkmenistan.

He also said Central Asian nations are not just neighbors but they are also kin.

Zarif earlier said Iran and Kazakhstan have many common goals when it comes to global nuclear disarmament and regional stability.

In a post on his Twitter account on Thursday, Zarif hailed his "substantive and fruitful meetings" with Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev and Foreign Minister Mukhtar Tleuberdi which were held in Kazakhstan's capital Nur-Sultan on Wednesday during his third leg of a four-nation Central Asian tour.

"Our two countries share many objectives on regional stability and global nuclear disarmament," the top Iranian diplomat said.

In his tweet, Zarif once again highlighted the top priority of the neighboring states in Iran's foreign policy.

During a meeting between Zarif and Tokayev in the Kazakh capital of Nur-Sultan, formerly called Astana, the two sides discussed bilateral relations and the latest developments surrounding the peace processes in Afghanistan and Syria in addition to Iran's nuclear deal.

"Excellent talks were held on important regional and international issues, and we thank Kazakhstan for its support of the Islamic Republic of Iran on international fronts," he said.

The Iranian and Kazakh foreign ministries also signed a 15-article document for cooperation between the two countries aimed at reinforcing friendly, fraternal and neighborly relations based on mutual respect and trust.

Mission...

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"The report rightly describes health workers as the heroes of 2020. Iranian health workers endured the excruciating pressure of US illegal sanctions while shouldering the burden of fighting the pandemic. Casualties among Iran's health workers are among the highest in the world," the embassy said.

"Amnesty International is hereby called upon to write a report on the ruinous impact of U.S. illegal sanction on the lives of more than 80 million Iranians who have to win their bread under the pressure of unilateral sanctions and the threat of a virus," the mission said.

Since May 2018, when Washington left a multilateral nuclear deal with Tehran, the Iranian nation has been the target of an American "maximum pressure" campaign, which is primarily devised to cripple Iran's energy sector and its transactions with international banks.

The U.S. claims the humanitarian goods are exempt from its sanctions, but the restrictive measures have scared foreign banks and companies away from engaging in any trade with Iran, something that prevents Tehran from using its financial resources to buy basic needs, such as food, medicine, and medical supplies, from abroad.

Just Thursday, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani said the United States had blocked the country's access to 10 million doses of a coronavirus vaccine by pressuring the companies involved in the transferring of the vaccines to Iran.

In October 2018, the International Court of Justice — also known as the World Court — ruled that the U.S. must lift the sanctions targeting Iran's imports of humanitarian goods such as food and medicine. That ruling, however, fell on deaf ears.

U.S. Transfers 50 Daesh Terrorists in Syria

DAMASCUS (Dispatches) – U.S. troops have moved 50 Daesh terrorists from its base in northeastern Syria to the eastern province of Dayr al-Zawr, SANA news agency reported on Thursday.

The Daesh terrorists were transported from the U.S. base in the Shaddadi area in Hasakah prov-

ince in northeastern Syria to the eastern countryside of Dayr al-Zawr by helicopters, said SANA.

The news agency said that the U.S. has made this move to use the terrorists again in operations against the Syrian army on Syrian soil. The terrorists are trained in the U.S. base in Shaddadi be-

fore being transferred to Dayr al-Zawr.

The Syrian government has repeatedly condemned the U.S. troops for supporting Daesh terrorists in Syria and using them in operations against the Syrian army.

Over the last few months, US

occupation troops have moved hundreds of "Daesh" terrorists from militia-controlled prisons in Hasakah city to various areas in Syria, after arming and providing logistical support to carry out terrorist attacks against residential areas, Syrian Army sites, and public facilities.

Iran...

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However, Tehran has repeatedly said its measures will be reversed as soon as Washington removes its illegal sanctions.

"Our 20% enrichment is now moving even faster than the speed envisaged by the Islamic Consultative Assembly (the Iranian Parliament) in its law, and 20% enriched materials are being produced now," Araqchi said.

He asserted that the process will continue until an agreement on the implementation of the JCPOA is reached, under which the U.S. should remove all of its sanctions.

"As it has been stressed many times, all of the sanctions must be removed in one step," the top Iranian negotiator added.

Araqchi also denied indirect talks with Washington through the European parties to the JCPOA, saying the talks involve China and Russia in addition to the Europeans.

"We are negotiating here with all of the current members of the JCPOA, namely the three European countries, Russia and China, as well as the European Union, which is the coordinator of the JCPOA, and they, on the other hand, are talking to the Americans and convey the results of the talks," he said.

The senior diplomat noted that there are signs that the Americans are reviewing their positions and are moving toward removing all of the sanctions.

"But we are not yet in a position to judge, and negotiations have not yet been concluded," he said, adding that there is a long path forward but the talks are constructive.

Araqchi also said on Thursday that the Iranian negotiators are engaged in talks over the removal of sanctions all at once as well as details of which and how the sanctions would be lifted.

"In our view, America has to take its actions in one step, then we'll verify, and then Iran will follow with its own actions," he reiterated. "How verification will happen is another point of our discussion."

U.S. State Department spokesman Ned Price on Thursday declined to respond directly to whether the U.S. would remove all of the sanctions in one go.

"Well, our response to specific proposals is best delivered in engagement with our European allies and with the Russian and Chinese partners on the ground in Vienna," he said at a press briefing on Thursday after he was asked to comment on Araqchi's remarks.

Price described the talks as constructive and as accomplishing what they set out to do.

"And in fact, these discussions have been constructive. This forum has been constructive; it has been businesslike; this has been a step forward," he said.

The American spokesman also voiced his country's preparedness to "take the necessary steps to return to compliance with the JCPOA and that would include lifting sanctions that are inconsistent with the JCPOA."

France ...

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The National Assembly, France's lower chamber which is dominated by President Emmanuel Macron's centrist La République En Marche (LREM) party, voted overwhelmingly in favor of the bill on February 16 before it was passed up to the conservative-led Senate.

The legislation has been debated in a highly charged atmosphere in France after three attacks late last year.

The law does not specifically mention the word Islam, but French Muslims have for months protested against it, saying several of its measures single them out.

Amnesty International last month warned the proposed law posed a "serious attack on rights and freedoms in France" and called for "many problematic provisions" of the bill to be scrapped or amended.

Coronavirus...

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Turkish medical groups say the reopening in March was premature and that the new measures won't go far enough to curb the surge. They have been calling for full lockdowns during the holy Muslim month.

In Iran, the death toll is also rising, prompting new restrictions that will take effect for 10 days in 257 cities beginning Saturday. They involve the closure of all parks, restaurants, confectionaries, beauty

salons, malls and bookstores.

Authorities in Pakistan, which is in the middle of a third surge of infections, are restricting inter-city transportation on weekends starting at midnight Friday as part of measures aimed at limiting coronavirus cases and deaths.

And elsewhere in Asia, authorities in Thailand on Friday ordered new restrictions in an effort to contain a growing coronavirus outbreak just days before the country's traditional Songkran New Year's holiday, when millions of people travel.

Japan, meanwhile, announced tougher measures ahead of the Summer Olympics.

In Germany, Poland and other countries in the 27-member European Union, vaccination programs are finally ramping up after a very slow start in the first three months of the year due to delivery shortages.

In Germany, thousands of doctors' practices joined the vaccination campaign this week. That helped Germany reach its second consecutive daily record on Thursday of 719,927 doses administered -- meaning that 14.7% of the population has now received at least one dose and 5.8% have received both shots.

Yet German health officials are warning of a steep rise in intensive care patients and are calling for stronger action to contain coronavirus infections.

Lothar Wieler, the head of Germany's disease control center, the Robert Koch Institute, said Friday that "intensive care units are filling up fast" across the country. He said nearly 4,500 COVID-19 patients are receiving intensive care, with