

Muslims Start Ramadan Under Shadow of Coronavirus

AL-QUDS (Dispatches) – The Muslim holy month of Ramadan began amid restrictions on communal prayers and fasting due to the coronavirus pandemic.

In some countries, the holy month began on Tuesday, while some others like Iran marked the start of the blessed month on Wednesday.

Muslims across the world will be observing fasting during which they abstain from eating, drinking and smoking from dawn until sunset.

Many countries have allowed communal prayers with strict social distancing rules in contrast to the empty mosques a year ago when the holy month coincided with the spike in coronavirus infections.

For Muslims, Ramadan is the month in which the first verses of the Qur'an, Islam's holy book, were revealed to the Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him) more than 1,400 years ago.



Muslims pray during the first dawn prayers of the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, around the Kaaba at the Grand Mosque, as they maintain social distancing to help curb the spread of the coronavirus, in the Muslim holy city of Mecca, Saudi Arabia.

The breaking of the fast each day is called the "Iftar", when families and communities gather to feast together. The meal starts with the eating of a single date, a tradition that originated with the Prophet Muhammad.

Saudi Arabia, home to Islam's holiest shrines, announced that

year as people took to the streets to mark the start of the fasting month.

Pakistanis began fasting Wednesday after rival moon-sighting committees agreed to a nationally applied start of what is called "Ramazan" in the country.

With the country in the grip of a third wave of the coronavirus — the deadliest so far — the government urged mosques to only allow prayers in open courtyards and to strictly enforce social distancing.

The total number of virus deaths is approaching 3 million, according to an AFP tally of official data, as the World Health Organization warned infections are rising exponentially despite efforts aimed at stopping them.

From Indonesia to Egypt and beyond, many Muslims around the world started Ramadan, though restrictions on worshippers varied from country to country.

Saudi Peace Initiatives Meant to Cover Up Crimes Against Yemenis: Official

SANA'A (Press TV) – Chairman of Yemen's Supreme Political Council has roundly dismissed Saudi Arabia's so-called peace initiative on the conflict in his country, emphasizing that such bids are meant to conceal the heinous crimes that the Riyadh regime and its allies are perpetrating against the Yemeni nation.

"The continuation of the crippling U.S.-Saudi blockade and aggression against our people for seven years proves to the entire world that the aggressor states as well as Washington have no respect whatsoever for human values and principles," Mehdi Mohammad Hussein al-Mashat said in a message on the occasion of the arrival of the holy Muslim fasting month of Ramadan.

He added, "Their talk of peace and at the same time pressing ahead with their aggression and siege is simply nothing but a desperate attempt to cover up their horrific crimes against Yemeni people."

On March 22, Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud presented a so-called peace initiative to end the war in Yemen, which would include reopening Sana'a airport and allow fuel and food imports through Hudaydah port — both of which are under the control of the Ansarullah movement.

The top Saudi diplomat told a news conference at the time that political negotiations between representatives of the Saudi-backed government of Yemen's former president Abd

Rabbuh Mansur Hadi and Ansarullah movement would resume as part of the initiative.

Al Saud said the initiative would be enforced once the Yemeni sides accepted it.

Reacting to the proposal, Mohammed Abdul-Salam, the spokesman for Ansarullah, said afterwards that it offered "nothing new," and did not meet the movement's demand for a complete lifting of the blockade on Sana'a airport and Hudaydah port.

"We expected that Saudi Arabia would announce an end to the blockade of ports and airports and an initiative to allow in 14 ships that are held by the coalition," he said. A "humanitarian right" should not be used as a pressure tool.

Believed to Disrupt Elections... Zionist Troops Arrest Dozens of Palestinians

West Bank (Dispatches) – Zionist troops have arrested at least 25 Palestinians across the occupied West Bank, Jordanian news agency Petra reported.

The army stormed the cities of al-Khalil, Bethlehem, Salfit, Jenin, and East al-Quds, the Palestinian Prisoners' Society said in a statement. It added that the citizens were arrested under the pretext that they were wanted by regime authorities.

Among those detained were prominent members of the Hamas resistance movement and former prisoner Mona Qa'dan.

Speaking to Anadolu Agency, Mahmoud Qa'dan, Mona's brother, said Zionist troops raided his sister's house at dawn in the town of Arraba and took her into custody.

"Mona was previously arrested five times, and was last released in 2016 after 40 months of detention in the occupation prisons," Mahmoud said.

A local source in al-Khalil, who spoke to Anadolu on condition of anonymity, said the Hamas member Mustafa Shawer, Palestinian Legislative Council member Omar al-Qawasmi, and Anas Rasras

were among those arrested in the raids.

A young woman, Shams Mashaqi, was also arrested from her village of Yaseed near Nablus.

Hamas has described the arrests of some of its leaders and members in recent weeks as "an attempt to disrupt and stop the course of the elections".

Palestinians will vote in a legislative election on May 22. At least three members of the Hamas slate of candidates for the election have been arrested in recent weeks.

According to Fuad al-Khuf-

fash, a Palestinian human rights researcher and expert on prisoners' affairs, the arrest of Hamas members and supporters in the run-up to the vote was an attempt to harm the faction's electoral chances.

"Prior to the 2006 elections, Israel arrested more than 560 leaders and members of Hamas," he said.

Al-Khuffash said the regime's tactic of arresting such people is aimed at "emptying the arena of influential people" who can determine the direction of the elections and limiting Hamas's choice of who can run.

Turkey Seeks Detention of 84 Coup Suspects

ISTANBUL (Dispatches) – Turkish prosecutors on Tuesday issued detention warrants for 84 suspects over their alleged links to a network accused of orchestrating a coup attempt in 2016.

Police launched simultaneous operations in 49 provinces to arrest the suspects, upon the order of the Chief Public Prosecutor's Office in Izmir, the state-run Anadolu agency reported.

Those targeted in the operations were reportedly soldiers on active duty, expelled military personnel, and on-duty police officers.

The suspects have alleged connections with the network headed by the U.S.-based Turkish cleric Fethullah Gulen, said the agency.

The Turkish government blames Gulen and his network for masterminding the coup bid in July 2016, in which 250 people were killed, and has been pushing for his extradition.

Meanwhile, an Ankara court has ordered the release of ten retired Turkish admirals who were detained earlier this month for signing a declaration in defense of the Montreux convention, NTV reports.

The ten admirals are being released on a signature bond, NTV said on Tuesday.

Earlier, lawyer Celal Ulgen told Sputnik that the Ankara Chief Public

Prosecutor's Office had demanded the arrest of one of the retired admirals, Ergun Mengi, who signed the collective letter in defense of the Montreux convention, and was asking for nine more admirals to be subject to house arrest.

Earlier this month, over 100 retired Turkish admirals published a letter highlighting the need for the country to stay in the Montreux convention amid plans to build a huge canal on the edge of Istanbul, which would not be covered by the treaty.

In addition, the letter spoke in favor of keeping the current constitution against the backdrop of the president's calls for a new basic law. The admirals also criticized the military top brass for alleged departure from the path outlined by Turkish founding father Mustafa Kemal Ataturk.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has condemned the retired admirals' letter saying that the military has no right to interfere in politics. Erdogan has, however, reaffirmed Turkey's commitment to the convention.

The Montreux Convention was adopted in 1936 in an attempt to guarantee freedom of passage through the strategic Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits for merchant ships of all countries, both in peace and wartime.

Lavrov...

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using the formal acronym for the nuclear deal.

"But the Americans should know that neither sanctions nor acts of sabotage will give them negotiation tools and these acts will only make the situation more difficult for them."

Iran on Monday said that the Zionist regime had sabotaged its Natanz enrichment plant and vowed it would take "revenge" and ramp up its nuclear activities.

Zarif warned: "If (the Zionist regime) thought that they can stop Iran from following up on lifting sanctions from the Iranian people, then they made a very bad gamble."

"What they did in Natanz, they thought it would reduce Iran's leverage" in the talks in Vienna.

"But it makes it possible for Iran to legally, legitimately, and in order to make up for this terrorist stupidity, use any capacity it has at Natanz."

Zarif said Iran would make the enrichment plant "more powerful" by using advanced centrifuges.

Iran's foreign ministry spokesman said Monday that the centrifuges hit by the power blackout were first-generation ones, not more advanced models banned under the nuclear deal.

President Hassan Rouhani told Lavrov that allowing the Zionist regime a foothold in the Persian Gulf region is "dangerous," given the fact that the regime is a "destabilizing and provocative" element.

Rouhani stressed that the security and stability of the region had to be maintained as he expressed Iran's willingness to work with regional states toward that end.

The expansion of regional cooperation would be a strategic measure to counter the United States' acts of unilateralism, he added.

Regional security, Rouhani said, is a matter for the regional countries to take care of, reaffirming the importance of the expanding defense and military cooperation between Iran and Russia since October last year, when a UN arms embargo on the country expired under the 2015 Iran nuclear deal.

Rouhani said Tehran and Moscow enjoy good political and regional cooperation, urging the two sides to bolster economic relations and accelerate the implementation of joint economic agreements and projects in the fields of oil, energy, and transportation.

Lavrov said there would be no limits to the expansion of cooperation between the two countries, including in the field of defense.

Police...

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a group of protesters not far from the police department — telling the demonstrators to use their voices but remain safe.

Ellison reminded the crowd he currently is leading the prosecution of the first officer charged in Floyd's death, and promised Wright's death will not be "swept under the rug."

The body camera footage showed three officers around a stopped car, which authorities said was pulled over because it had expired registration tags. When another officer attempts to handcuff Wright, a second officer tells him he's being arrested on a warrant. That's when the struggle begins, followed by the shooting. Then the car travels several blocks before striking another vehicle.

Wright died of a gunshot wound to the chest, the Hennepin County Medical Examiner's office said in a statement.

The state Bureau of Criminal Apprehension, which is investigating the shooting, identified the officer as Kim Potter, a 26-year veteran who has been placed on administrative leave.

Wright's father, Aubrey Wright, told ABC's "Good Morning America" on Tuesday that he rejects the explanation that the officer accidentally fired her handgun instead of her Taser.

"I cannot accept that. I lost my son. He's never coming back. I can't accept that. A mistake? That doesn't even sound right. This officer has been on the force for 26 years. I can't accept that," he said.

Wright's brother, Dallas Bryant, told about a hundred people gathered for a candlelight vigil Monday evening that Wright sounded scared during the phone call, and questioned how the officer could mistake a gun for a Taser.

"You know the difference between plastic and metal. We all know it," he said.

Demonstrators began to gather shortly after the shooting, with some jumping atop police cars. Wright's death prompted protests in other U.S. cities, including in Portland, Oregon, where police said a demonstration turned into a riot Monday night, with some in the crowd throwing rocks and other projectiles at officers.

The trial of Derek Chauvin, the former Minneapolis officer charged in Floyd's death, continued Monday. Floyd, a Black man, died May 25 after Chauvin, who is white, pressed his knee against Floyd's neck. Prosecutors say Floyd was pinned for 9 minutes, 29 seconds. The judge in that case refused Monday to sequester the jury after a defense attorney argued that the panel could be influenced by the prospect of what might happen as a result of their verdict.

Russian...

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in Moscow. It is the largest oil pipeline company in the world. Iran's Inter Naft Gas Prom Pars (INGP) Holding is based in Tehran, with branches on Kish Island and Moscow. Their partnership is based on promoting economic and social development in Iran and Russia, according to INGP's website.

Iran is currently grappling with a new wave of coronavirus infections which, officials say, surged following a two-week public holiday for Nowruz, the Persian New Year.

Millions traveled to the Caspian coast and other popular vacation spots, packed markets to shop for new clothes and toys and congregated in homes for parties in defiance of government health guidelines.

The country began a 10-day lockdown on Saturday, ordering most shops closed and offices restricted to one-third capacity in cities declared as red zones, including Tehran and 250 cities and towns.

Iran has already received more than 400,000 of 2 million Sputnik V vaccines on order from Russia. It has also received 250,000 doses of China's Sinopharm vaccine and part of an order of 500,000 doses of India's COVAXIN.

Last week, the COVAX vaccine-sharing scheme delivered its first shipment to Iran from the Netherlands containing 700,000 vaccine doses.

Iran is also developing at least four local vaccine candidates, one in cooperation with Cuba, which are expected to reach production in a few months.

The news of the contract between Region TransNeft and INGP comes as Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov is visiting Iran to extend a comprehensive cooperation agreement between the two countries.

Last month, Iran's Foreign Ministry issued a statement on the 20th anniversary of the agreement, saying relations between the two countries were "stronger than ever". It coincided with a recent correspondence between Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei and Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Unlike their political relations, trade between Iran and Russia has moved in a slow lane.

Russia has signed an agreement to implement the second and third units of Iran's Bushehr nuclear power plant after bringing the first facility online in 2011.

In 2019, Iran reportedly presented as many as 12 projects in the petroleum sector to Russia's Gazprom, Rosneft, Gazprom Neft, Zarubezhneft, Taftneft and Lukoil for development amid talk of Moscow's readiness to invest up to \$50 billion in the Islamic Republic, but they did not move up to a contract.