

Libya sees 1st virus case as more curfews called in Mideast

Written by Administrator

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CAIRO (Net) — Libya recorded its first confirmed case of the coronavirus on Tuesday, the U.N.-backed government announced, stoking concern that an outbreak could overwhelm the war-torn country's already weakened health care system.

As the coronavirus pandemic sweeps across the Middle East, countries have sought to slow the increase of cases by limiting the movements of hundreds of millions of people. The Arab world's most populous country, Egypt, as well as Syria, a country ravaged by nine years of war, became the latest countries to impose nightly curfews starting this week.

The International Monetary Fund meanwhile said that shortages in crucial medical supplies could drive up prices and inflict pain on the Mideast's poorest nations.

There are over 31,000 cases of the virus across the Mideast, the vast majority in the hard-hit nation of Iran. While most recover from the virus and the COVID-19 illness that it causes, it is highly contagious and causes severe illness in some patients, particularly the elderly and those with weakened immune systems. Bottoming crude oil prices have put additional strain on even the region's wealthiest countries, affecting their ability to cope as the virus strains medical systems worldwide.

A 73-year-old man who crossed into Libya from neighboring Tunisia on March 5 became the large North African country's first recorded case. The Libyan patient had recently traveled to Saudi Arabia, according to the National Center for Disease Control, and is receiving medical treatment for his fever and cough in isolation at a Tripoli hospital.

The confirmation of Libya's first case, three weeks after the patient's arrival in the country, poses a test for its fragile medical system. Attempts at a nationwide disease protection program have been undermined by the country's division between two rival governments, in the east and west of the country, and a patchwork of armed groups supporting either administration. Even on Tuesday, Tripoli's suburbs came under heavy fire as the United Nations appealed for a freeze in fighting so authorities could focus on preventing the spread of the coronavirus.

Meanwhile in Egypt, Prime Minister Moustafa Madbouly told reporters that the 11-hour nationwide curfew from 7 p.m. until 6 a.m. would go into effect Wednesday, during which public transportation would also come to a halt. Egypt has confirmed 402 cases and 22 fatalities, including two senior military officers.

Madbouly announced the continued closure of airports, schools and universities until April 12.

He said non-essential shops will close Fridays and Saturdays, Egypt's weekend. The government has already locked down populous tourist cities in the south and the Red Sea, as well as shuttered museums and archeological sites, including the famed Giza Pyramids.

President Abdel Fattah el-Sissi warned that attempts to violate the announced measures would be met with "the utmost firmness and decisiveness."

With mosques closed, dozens of people in the Mediterranean city of Alexandria took to their balconies before dawn to pray for help against the virus, online videos showed. Other footage showed some three dozen people spilling into a side street and chanting: "There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is his Messenger." Several of the participants were later arrested.

In Syria, where the healthcare system has been decimated by nearly a decade of civil war, the government said an apparently open-ended nightly curfew beginning at 6 p.m. (1600 GMT) will go into effect Wednesday.

Syria has reported only one case of the coronavirus so far, but it has enforced strict containment measures in government-held areas including grounding commercial flights,

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closing borders and shutting down restaurants and public transportation. Long lines streamed outside grocery stores, banks and gas stations across the Syrian capital, Damascus, as people braced for wider closures.

The IMF, which traditionally has told governments to implement greater austerity measures, was urging Mid-east governments to offer temporary tax relief and cash transfers. It warned a lack of medical supplies could hurt Iraq, Sudan and Yemen if it leads to a surge in prices.

"Given the large numbers of people employed in the service sector, there will be wide reverberations if unemployment rises and wages and remittances fall," the IMF's director for the Middle East, Jihad Azour, said in statement.

Health Ministry spokesman Kianoush Jahanpour warned the public that infections will likely rise further, as Iran has improved its testing capabilities. The ministry has launched a website for the public to report suspected cases, alerting medical staff to administer tests.

The sultanate of Oman meanwhile announced it would halt all passenger flights beginning Sunday, although cargo flights would continue.

Saudi Arabia reported Tuesday that its virus cases jumped from 562 to 767, and included its first death.