

Egypt announces 2-week, nighttime curfew to slow virus

Written by Administrator

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CAIRO (Net) — Egypt will impose a two-week, nightly curfew in the Arab world's most populous country in an effort to stop the spread of the new coronavirus, its prime minister announced Tuesday as the International Monetary Fund warned that a shortage of medical supplies could affect the Mideast's poorest nations.

There are over 31,000 confirmed 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, bottoming crude oil prices have put additional strain on even the wealthiest countries of the region. That in turn could affect their ability to spend on needed supplies as the virus challenges medical systems worldwide.

Already, countries have reacted by either urging or ordering hundreds of millions of people to stay home. Egypt, home to over 100 million alone, became the latest on Tuesday.

Egyptian Prime Minister Moustafa Madbouly told a news conference that the 11-hour curfew from 7 p.m. until 6 a.m. would go into effect Wednesday across the country. He said many kinds of transportation will be halted during the curfew.

Egypt has 366 confirmed cases and 21 fatalities, including two senior military officers.

Madbouly also announced the closure of schools and universities for another two weeks until April 12. He said shops and malls will be closed Fridays and Saturdays, the weekend in Egypt, and are allowed to work five days a week from 7 a.m. till 5 p.m. He said groceries, bakeries and pharmacies would be excluded from the closure order.

"We aim to protect our families and citizens across Egypt," Madbouly said. "There are more restrictive measures that we will take according to the developments." He did not elaborate. President Abdel Fattah el-Sissi pleaded with his people to work with the government and respond positively to the measures taken to stem the spread of the virus.

"I am confident that the great Egyptian people will respond positively to these measures, in order to protect the security and safety of our beloved Egypt," he tweeted, hours before the curfew announcement.

El-Sissi's government has banned large gatherings, halted international air travel, closed all its museums and archaeological sites including the famed Giza Pyramids, and locked down the ancient city of Luxor along with the resorts of Hurghada and Sharm el-Sheikh. Religious authorities also ordered a two-week closure of churches and mosques.

In the Gaza Strip, Hamas-run religious authorities announced all mosques will be shut down for two weeks starting Wednesday. Schools had already closed.

After the detection of two coronavirus cases among returnees already in quarantine, Hamas imposed further precautions that included canceling Friday prayers, closure of wedding halls and banning weekly street markets.

An Israeli-Egyptian blockade of Gaza, in place since the militant group took power in 2007, has slowed the arrival of the new virus to the densely populated Palestinian enclave. The two cases contracted the infection in Pakistan and returned to Gaza last week before Egypt closed its border with Gaza.

The IMF, which traditionally has urged governments to implement greater austerity measures, now urges Mideast 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

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Middle East, Jihad Azour, said in statement.

In Egypt, tourist cancellations have reached 80%, while retail and hospitality sectors have also been hard-hit in countries like the United Arab Emirates where tourism is a pillar of the economy, according to the IMF.

The arrival of the global pandemic in Syria with one positive case, as well as in the Gaza Strip, has raised concerns the virus could run rampant in some of the most vulnerable areas in the Middle East. War-torn Libya and Yemen, which have yet to report any cases, are also a source of concern.

The worst outbreak in the Mideast is unfolding in Iran, where authorities reported another 122 deaths on Tuesday, bringing the total number of fatalities to more than 1,900 amid more than 24,800 confirmed cases. The dead included the mother-in-law of the son of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the state-run IRNA news agency said Monday.

Health Ministry spokesman Kianoush Jahanpour warned the public that numbers of the infected likely will rise further as Iran now has more ability to test and screen suspected cases. The ministry also has launched a website for the public to report if they suspect they have the virus, which will link them to medical staff who will come to them for tests.

So far, 41 million people have used the site, Jahanpour said. Iran is home to some 80 million people.

Lines have formed outside grocery stores, banks and gas stations across the Syrian capital, Damascus, as people braced for wider closures. The government has already closed restaurants, cafes and other businesses, and has halted public transportation.

In Egypt's Mediterranean city of Alexandria, dozens of people early Tuesday prayed to God for help against the virus. Online video showed people praying from their windows and balconies. Others showed some three dozen people marching in a side street and chanting: "There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is his Messenger," drawing criticism from people who said the demonstrators should have stayed at home.