

Ynet-News, March 31, 2020 – Tuesday -

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Israel retools missile production to mass produce respirators for virus victims

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Israeli woman charged with spying for Hezbollah

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Israel billions; health 10, social security 20, businesses 32, economy 8 for 3 months

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Orthodox & Arabs defy confined group limit 10 & synagogues close daily prayers

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Israel doctors demand best public health system standards & better health minister

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Syria, Yemen, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Iran & Gaza Strip on curfew & lockdowns

03.31.20 – Tu - - -

Israel retools missile production to mass produce respirators for virus victims

03.31.20

Israel retools missile production line to mass produce ventilators

Bennett warning of lack of life-saving equipment leads to collaboration between Defense Ministry, state-owned IAI and medical device maker Inovytec to convert weapons facility

Reuters| Published: 03.31.20 , 21:49

Israel has converted a missile production facility to mass produce ventilators and offset a shortage of the life-saving machines as the coronavirus continues to spread, the Defense Ministry said on Tuesday.

Israel has reported 20 fatalities and close to 5,000 cases. Defense Minister Naftali Bennett has warned that Israel only has around 2,000 ventilators and needs many more of the breathing devices to help victims recover from the respiratory illness.

Countries around the world have reported ventilator shortages and some have leaned on private companies and their militaries to boost production.

The Israeli initiative is a collaboration between the defense ministry, state-owned Israel Aerospace Industries (IAI) and medical device maker Inovytec.

"This morning, the production line was inaugurated in the classified missile production department of IAI, after which dozens of ventilators were tested and assembled," the ministry said in a statement.

Some 30 ventilators have been delivered to Israel's health ministry, the statement said. It did not indicate how many machines it planned to produce daily or whether they were being made available for export as well as local use.

The rapid retooling of the missile production line was completed in days, the statement said.

"[Israel] must develop independent capabilities in everything related to dealing with the COVID-19 virus pandemic," Bennett said.

"We cannot remain dependent on procurement from other countries," he added.

03.30.20 – Mo - - -

Israeli woman charged with spying for Hezbollah

03.30.20

Israeli woman charged with spying for Hezbollah

25-year-old accused of contact with foreign agent, handing information to enemy with intent to harm state security, providing service to terrorist organization; defendant allegedly photographed military assets, Haifa port, hospital

Gilad Morag | Published: 03.30.20 , 21:22

An Israeli woman has been indicted for allegedly spying for the Lebanese-based Hezbollah terrorist group.

Lod District Court charged the 25-year-old with "contact with a foreign agent, handing information to an enemy with the intent to harm state security and providing a service to a terrorist organization."

The indictment said that the woman, who was thought to have lived in the southern city of Be'er Sheva from 2018-2019, contacted Ali, a resident of southern Lebanon, through Facebook.

The unnamed woman and Ali were in contact for a relatively short period before he began requesting that she perform various espionage tasks on Hezbollah's behalf. This included taking and sending photographs.

She is alleged to have captured numerous images, including "12 photographs of military vehicles traveling on Route 6; photographs of the perimeter fence in the area of Rosh Hanikra [on the Israel-Lebanon border]; the Bahai Gardens in Haifa; the lookout point at Monastery of Our Lady of Mount Carmel compound [in Haifa]; Haifa Port; military vehicles in the Hebron area; and Hatzetim Air Force Base and Air Force Museum."

The defendant is also was accused of photographing the Iron Dome Missile Defense system installations near her Be'er Sheva home, the Erez Crossing between the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip and Israel, and Haifa's Rambam Healthcare Campus.

She either acquiesced to each request and took the photographs herself or was in contact with a friend who did so. In all cases, the defendant forwarded Ali the images.

Ali also requested that the woman attend a lecture given by an Israeli journalist where she asked the speaker whether he believed war between Israel and Hezbollah was likely.

He responded in the negative, an answer that she too passed on to Ali.

Later, Ali asked of her to photograph a "military base" near Tel Aviv University, which she did not comply with.

Seeking to extend her remand until the end of proceedings against her, prosecutors wrote that the defendant has been charged with multiple and varied serious security crimes.

They said that there "was a reasonable basis to fear she will endanger public security" and that in identifying with a "terrorist organization known for its unusual violence and cruelty," she presented a clear and present danger to the State of Israel.

03.30.20 – Mo - - -

Israel billions; health 10, social security 20, businesses 32, economy 8 for 3 months

03.30.20

'Israeli society won't be the same': Netanyahu unveils stricter coronavirus steps

PM says there are communities in the country that 'disrespect the government guidelines'; Netanyahu along with Kahlon, via satellite, also presented NIS 80 billion financial rescue package in an effort to boost ailing economy in wake of COVID-19 crisis

Ynet| Published: 03.30.20 , 20:12

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Monday unveiled the long-awaited financial rescue package to help boost Israel's economy in the wake of the coronavirus epidemic and announced new stricter measures meant to combat the health crisis. The finance

minister who helped unveil the plan, warned the society "won't be the same" until the crisis is over.

The plan was announced via a press conference from Prime Minister's Office after him and his inner circle placed themselves in self-isolation pending epidemiological results, after one of his advisers tested positive for COVID-19.

The prime minister kicked off the press conference by addressing the criticism leveled the ultra-Orthodox community in the country, members of which appear to defy the government restrictions.

"There are particular groups in the country who disrespect the guidelines," he said, adding he ordered security forces to step up enforcement in areas with a high number of violations of the directives.

"It's true that in Israel we're in a better situation than most other places in the world," he said, adding he nevertheless wants to see a reduction in the number of new coronavirus cases. "There won't be gatherings of over two people who are not from the same nuclear family."

Additionally, he announced that prayers will not be allowed in open areas and that religious events should be restricted as much as possible. Netanyahu also called on Israelis not to visit family during the Passover holiday next month.

Furthermore, essential business that are still allowed to operate will need to reduce their workforce from the current 30% to 15%. If, however, workplace is spacious enough to allow more than the required 15%, the number of employees can be increased by another 15%.

Netanyahu said the government came up with an unprecedented NIS 80 billion rescue package for the next three months, which represents approximately 6% of Israel's GDP. "Half the amount will come in cash from government funds and the other half will be credit, very convenient," he added.

Finance Minister Moshe Kahlon also took part in the virtual news conference via a video stream from the Finance Ministry and announced he intends to retire from politics once the new government is formed.

"I know that this [plan] will not bring the situation back to what it was - not for business, nor for freelancers, not for employees and unfortunately not the Israeli society," said Kahlon.

"But, this is still the most significant plan that the Israeli economy has ever seen and it will be improved if needed. I have no doubt that if this crisis continues, we will need additional plans ... we will not let Israeli economy fail."

Israel has seen a rise of more than 800,000 people registering as unemployed since the restriction on business were first introduced by the government at the start of March. The Employment Service said the new figure puts the country's rate of unemployment at 23.1%.

"Within a month, we have jumped from 30,000 unemployed to one million. That's an unimaginable number. Entire industries shut down and hundreds of thousands of households are under financial burden," he said.

Kahlon said the plan encompasses “four central spheres” of Israel’s economy. The first one is the **health care** system that will be provided with NIS **10 billion** to fight coronavirus. The second is the NIS **20 billion social security** network for employees, self-employed and the elderly.

The third is a NIS **32 billion rescue package** for small, medium-sized and large **businesses** and enterprises. The fourth section is a NIS **eight billion** program to **accelerate the growth of the economy**.

Kahlon said he estimated the economy "would return, albeit gradually" to normal activity after the Passover holiday, which ends mid-April.

Bank of Israel Governor Amir Yaron, who has said the crisis had arrived when Israel's economy was in a strong position, said the stimulus package would reduce uncertainty. The central bank has projected an economic contraction of 2.5% in 2020 **as long as the nationwide lockdown eases by the end of April**.

03.30.20 – Mo - - -

Orthodox & Arabs defy confined group limit 10 & synagogues close daily prayers

03.30.20

Some ultra-Orthodox Israelis chafe at coronavirus restrictions

Police forces begin patrolling Haredi neighborhoods, prone to contagion because they're tend to be poor and congested, after a series of incidents that defied national guidelines resulted in a spike of CIVUD-19 infections in the religious community

Reuters| Published: **03.30.20** , 18:27

Israeli police have used a drone, helicopter and stun grenades in recent days to prevent people gathering in an ultra-Orthodox Jewish neighborhood of Jerusalem in defiance of Health Ministry measures aimed at slowing the spread of the coronavirus.

On Monday, police, some in riot gear and surgical masks, **encountered** occasional **resistance** and verbal abuse while enforcing the measures in a part of the city whose **residents have long chafed against the state**.

Israeli security forces **arrest an Ultra Orthodox Jewish man** as they **close a synagogue** in the Mea Shearim Ultra-Orthodox neighbourhood in Jerusalem, amid **efforts to curb the spread of the COVID-19** coronavirus pandemic.

"Nazis!" shouted a group of boys, as police pulled men off the narrow streets of Mea Shearim.

As well as **broadcasting the message "Stay Home"** from the **helicopter and drone**, police have issued offenders with fines.

Israeli officials describe the ultra-Orthodox as especially prone to contagion because their districts tend to be poor and congested, and in normal times they are accustomed to holding **thrice-daily prayers with often large congregations**.

Some of their rabbis have also cast doubt on the degree of coronavirus risk.

Many ultra-Orthodox reject the authority of the Israeli state, whose Jewish majority is mostly secular.

Israel's 21 percent Arab minority are another sensitive community, where officials say testing for the virus has been lagging.

"There are three 'Corona Countries' - the ultra-Orthodox sector, the Arab sector and the rest of the State of Israel," Defense Minister Naftali Bennett told reporters on Sunday.

The Mea Shearim patrols represented an escalation in security enforcement. On Saturday, a funeral was attended by hundreds of mourners in Bnei Brak, an ultra-Orthodox town.

Reprimanded by Internal Security Minister Gilad Erdan for allowing what he deemed a "threat to life" at the funeral, police issued a statement vowing to "draw lessons to prevent similar situations recurring".

Public gatherings are currently limited to up to 10 people, people must keep two meters apart and the public has been urged to stay at home unless they need to buy food, get medical attention, or go to work deemed crucial by the state.

Yehuda Meshi-Zahav, ultra-Orthodox head of ZAKA, a volunteer emergency-medicine group, told Israel's Army Radio that most ultra-Orthodox Jews did follow Health Ministry directives and only a small group defied them, possibly for political reasons.

"Everything they are doing has no value when they constitute a 'ticking bomb' because of whom people will get infected," he said of those not following the government's guidelines.

Israel has reported 4,347 coronavirus cases and 15 fatalities.

With the Health Ministry warning that the dead could eventually number in the thousands, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was due on Monday to convene officials to discuss a proposed lockdown of some of the country.

Bennett has proposed setting up a coronavirus surveillance system that would allow authorities to focus lockdowns on areas most prone to contagion.

03.29.20 – Su - - -

Israel doctors demand best public health system standards & better health minister

03.29.20

Israeli doctors demand health minister be replaced by professional

In an open letter Netanyahu and Gantz, doctors lament years of neglect that left the country's health care system at its lowest point during the time of coronavirus outbreak; sources say there are no plans to replace Litzman in the next government

Adir Yanko | Published: 03.29.20, 15:58

Israeli doctors on Sunday called on the government to replace Health Minister Yaakov Litzman with a medical professional in the wake of coronavirus crisis in the country.

In an open letter some to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his future coalition partner Benny Gantz, the heads of hospital departments and senior medical officials expressed their dissatisfaction with Litzman's conduct during the COVID-19 epidemic and urged to replace him with someone who has the necessary experience.

Netanyahu and Gantz are in the midst of unity talks in an effort to agree on a coalition government to address the coronavirus pandemic emergency. Sources familiar with the negotiations told Ynet the replacement of Litzman is not currently on the table.

"We have nothing against outgoing Health Minister Litzman and have great respect for him," said Professor Yoram Kluger, Rambam Hospital's chief of surgery who was behind the initiative.

"But, in light of the dire state Israel's healthcare system and an emergency on the scope of a pandemic, health workers can no longer agree to be cast aside by other considerations."

The letter said the current health crisis caught Israeli health care system at its lowest points due to years of government neglect.

"The health care system is judged by the quality of care - which is the work of physicians and medical staff - and not by the infrastructure, staffing or planning," said the letter. "All deficiencies that we have been demanding to be addressed."

"Despite efforts to deal with the needs, those have only increased with hospitals that are in the country's periphery, offering inferior care while Israel itself was falling behind the rest of the world in the quality of care, while private medicine was allowed to thrive at the expense of public health services."

The doctors said that they will not allow the recent comptroller report, which outlined the problems stemming from government neglect, to be filed away as earlier dossiers had been and say they will continue to demand a better public health system with the best standards possible and expect the same from the Health Ministry.

03.29.20 – Su - - -

US checkpoints screen cars, quarantines, stay-home orders, ban gatherings to 10

03.29.20

Off the charts': Virus hot spots grow in middle America

Worldwide COVID-19 cases surpass 660,000 with more than 30,000 deaths reported as cases; Italy, Spain and France remain on lockdown amid record number of infected; Russia closes the border, while in Africa, pandemic prevention measures take a violent turn

Associated Press| Published: 03.29.20 , 10:24

The coronavirus continued its unrelenting spread across the United States with fatalities doubling in two days and authorities saying Saturday that an infant who tested positive had died. It pummeled big cities like New York, Detroit, New Orleans, and Chicago, and made its way, too, into rural America as hotspots erupted in small Midwestern towns and Rocky Mountain ski havens.

Elsewhere, Russia announced a full border closure while in parts of Africa, pandemic prevention measures took a violent turn, with Kenyan police firing tear gas and officers elsewhere seen on video hitting people with batons.

Worldwide infections surpassed the 660,000 mark with more than 30,000 deaths as new cases also stacked up quickly in Europe, according to a tally by Johns Hopkins University. The U.S. leads the world in reported cases with more than 120,000. Confirmed deaths surpassed 2,000 on Saturday, twice the number just two days before, highlighting how quickly infections are escalating. Still, five countries have higher death tolls: Italy, Spain, China, Iran, and France. Italy has more than 10,000 deaths, the most of any country. Illinois Gov. J.B. Pritzker said Saturday that an infant with COVID-19 died in Chicago and the cause of death is under investigation. Officials didn't release other information, including whether the child had other health issues.

"If you haven't been paying attention, maybe this is your wake-up call," said Illinois Department of Public Health Director Dr. Ngozi Ezike.

New York remained the worst-hit U.S. city. Gov. Andrew Cuomo said defeating the virus will take "weeks and weeks and weeks." The U.N. donated 250,000 face masks to the city, and Cuomo delayed the state's presidential primary from April 28 to June 23.

As President Donald Trump made his way to Norfolk, Virginia, to see off a U.S. Navy medical ship sent to New York City to help, he suggested imposing some kind of quarantine for New York and parts of New Jersey and Connecticut, all hit hard by the coronavirus. But he later tweeted that he intended to issue a "strong travel advisory" instead.

It wasn't entirely clear whether he had the power to impose such a quarantine for the three states, and the idea was met with confusion and anger from their governors. Cuomo said on CNN that it would be illegal, economically catastrophic and unproductive since other areas are already seeing a surge.

Still, some states without known widespread infections began to try to limit exposure from visitors from harder-hit areas.

Rhode Island National Guard troops were instructed to go door to door in coastal communities to find New Yorkers and advise them about a mandatory 14-day quarantine for people from the state.

And in Florida, Gov. Ron DeSantis has ordered anyone arriving from Louisiana to self-quarantine and said law enforcement officers would set up checkpoints to screen cars from the state.

Louisiana has surpassed 3,300 infections with 137 dead from COVID-19, according to the health department. Gov. John Bel Edwards said the region was on track to run out of ventilators by the first week of April.

Cases also have been rising rapidly in **Detroit**, where poverty and poor health have been problems for years. The number of infections surged to 1,381, with **31 deaths**, as of noon Saturday. The city's homeless population is especially vulnerable, officials said.

"At this time, the trajectory of Detroit is unfortunately even steeper than that of New York," said Dr. Teena Chopra, the medical director of infection prevention and hospital epidemiology at the Detroit Medical Center.

"This is off the charts," she said.

Chopra said many patients have ailments like asthma, heart disease, diabetes, and hypertension. She also acknowledged that in Detroit, one of the nation's largest African American cities, there is a distrust among some in the community of the medical system and government due to systemic racism.

"In Detroit, we are seeing a lot of patients that are presenting to us with severe disease, rather than a minor disease," said Chopra, who worried about a "tsunami" of patients.

Trump approved a major disaster declaration for Michigan, providing money for the outbreak. He has done the same for New York, Louisiana and Illinois.

Cases in Chicago and suburban Cook County accounted for about three-fourths of Illinois' 3,026 total as of Friday. Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot closed popular lakeshore parks after people failed to practice social distancing, despite a statewide shelter-at-home order.

The governor of **Kansas also issued a stay-at-home order to begin Monday**, as the virus takes hold in more rural areas where doctors worry about the lack of ICU beds.

A cluster of three counties in rural **Indiana** have surging rates of confirmed cases. One of them, **Decatur**, population 26,000, has 30 cases with one confirmed death and another suspected, said Sean Durbin, the county's public health emergency preparedness coordinator. Several cases were traced to large gatherings earlier in the month, including a religious retreat and a high school basketball tournament.

The disease threatens to be devastating for close-knit communities where everyone knows everyone, Durbin said, adding that he was a friend of the person believed to have died from the virus as well as others currently in critical condition.

The county health department has already run out of personal protective equipment, Durbin said. The last supply from the federal stockpile arrived more than a week ago and contained just 77 N95 masks and two dozen face shields.

"I wish there was a stronger word for disappointed," he said. "I'm calling on them to do better."

Blaine County, Idaho, a scenic ski haven for wealthy tourists, now has around 100 confirmed cases of COVID-19, the highest rate per capita outside the New York area.

Two people have died.

The virus continues to strain health systems in **Italy, Spain, and France**. **Lockdowns** of varying degrees have been introduced **across Europe**, nearly emptying streets in normally bustling cities.

Germany has fewer deaths than some neighboring countries but has **closed nonessential shops** and **banned public gatherings of more than two people** until April 20. It still had its share of grim news: 12 residents of a nursing home in the northern town of Wolfsburg have died since Monday after being infected, news agency DPA reported.

Italian Premier Giuseppe Conte announced he had signed a decree freeing up 400 million euros (\$440 million) for coupons and packages of food aid, to be delivered door-to-door if necessary.

"People are suffering psychologically. They're not used to staying in their homes. But they are also suffering economically," Conte said. Italy has almost completed a three-week lockdown, with no end in sight.

In Spain, where stay-at-home restrictions have been in place for nearly two weeks, the death toll rose to 5,812.

Another 8,000 confirmed infections pushed that count above 72,000 cases. But Spain's director of emergencies, Fernando Simón, saw hope in that the rate of infection is slowing and figures "indicate that the outbreak is stabilizing and may be reaching its peak in some areas."

Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez called for a more vigorous response from the European Union. Spain, Italy, France, and six other members have asked the union to share the burden of European debt, dubbed "coronabonds" in the media, to help fight the virus. But the idea has met resistance from other members, led by Germany and the Netherlands.

"It is the most difficult moment for the EU since its foundation and it has to be ready to rise to the challenge," Sanchez said.

As the epicenter has shifted westward, the situation has calmed in China, where some restrictions have been lifted. Some subway service was restored in Wuhan, where the virus first emerged in December after the city of 11 million had its virus risk evaluation reduced from high to medium.

For most people, the coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough that clear up in two to three weeks. But for others, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, the virus can cause more severe illness, including pneumonia, and lead to death.

More than 135,000 people have recovered, according to Johns Hopkins.

Countries are still trying to bring home citizens stranded abroad. On Saturday, 174 foreign tourists and four Nepali nationals in the foothills of Mount Everest were flown out days after being stranded at the only airstrip serving the world's highest mountain. Indian authorities sent buses to the outskirts of New Delhi to meet an exodus of migrant workers desperately trying to reach their home villages amid the world's largest lockdown, which effectively put millions out of work.

Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin ordered his country's borders fully closed as of Monday, exempting diplomats as well as residents of the exclave of the Kaliningrad region.

03.22.20 – Su - - -

WHO expert: Lockdowns not enough to defeat coronavirus

03.22.20

WHO expert: Lockdowns not enough to defeat coronavirus

Warning that the pandemic may be prolonged, World Health Organization's emergency guru says testing needed to locate carriers who must be isolated them to prevent resurgence

Reuters| Published: 03.22.20 , 13:21

Countries can't simply lock down their societies to defeat coronavirus, the World Health Organization's top emergency expert said on Sunday, adding that public health measures are needed to avoid a resurgence of the virus later on.

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"What we really need to focus on is finding those who are sick, those who have the virus, and isolate them, find their contacts and isolate them," Mike Ryan said in an interview on the BBC's Andrew Marr Show.

"The danger right now with the lockdowns ... if we don't put in place the strong public health measures now when those movement restrictions and lockdowns are lifted, the danger is the disease will jump back up."

Much of Europe and the United States have followed China and other Asian countries and introduced drastic restrictions to fight the new coronavirus, with most workers told to work from home and schools, bars, pubs, and restaurants being closed.

Ryan said that the examples of China, Singapore, and South Korea, which coupled restrictions with rigorous measures to test every possible suspect, provided a model for Europe, which the WHO has said has replaced Asia as the epicenter of the pandemic.

"Once we've suppressed the transmission, we have to go after the virus. We have to take the fight to the virus," Ryan said.

Italy is now the worst-hit country in the world by the virus, and UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson has warned that Britain's health system could be overwhelmed unless people avoid social interactions. British housing minister Robert Jenrick said that the production of tests would double next week and ramp up thereafter.

Ryan also said that several vaccines were in development, but only one had begun trials in the United States. Asked how long it would take before there was a vaccine available in Britain, he said that people needed to be realistic.

"We have to make sure that it's absolutely safe... we are talking at least a year," he said.

"The vaccines will come, but we need to get out and do what we need to do now."

03.24.20 – Tu - - -

UN suspends food aid to protect staff, after 2 Gazan's visited Pakistan & test positive

03.24.20

UN's Palestinian refugee agency suspends Gaza food aid

UNRWA says measure aims to protect its staff and their recipients, hopes to resume distribution from different locations, including schools
Ynet| Published: 03.24.20 , 16:38

The United Nations' agency for Palestinian refugees has temporarily suspended aid to the Gaza Strip after the detection of two coronavirus cases in the territory.

"Food aid will be temporarily suspended until finding a safer way to deliver aid," UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency) spokesperson Adnan abu Hasna said in a statement.

"The suspension is a precautionary measure to maintain the safety of [UNRWA]'s staff and beneficiaries," he said.

UNRWA said that it would arrange other locations to distribute the food in an orderly and safer manner through other distribution points, which may reportedly include its schools.

The Palestinian Health Ministry announced early Sunday that two residents who returned recently from Pakistan to the Gaza Strip tested positive for the coronavirus.

The development added to fears of a potential outbreak in crowded Gaza, which has an overstretched health care system after years of an Israeli-Egyptian blockade, cross-border conflicts with Israel, and Palestinian political divides.

Gaza has been mostly cut off from the world as Israel and Egypt imposed severe movement restrictions following the 2007 takeover by the Hamas terror group. This is believed to have delayed the arrival of the virus.

According to UN figures, there are around 1.4 million refugees in the densely-populated territory.

03.25.20 – We - - -

Syria, Yemen, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Iran & Gaza Strip on curfew & lockdowns

03.25.20

Aid group says Mideast lockdowns hinder humanitarian efforts

Norwegian Refugee Council says it cannot reach some 300,000 people in Syria, Yemen and the Gaza Strip, where authorities have imposed strict measures to halt the spread of coronavirus

Associated Press| Published: 03.25.20 , 14:56

An international aid group said Wednesday that closures aimed at containing the coronavirus pandemic are preventing it from reaching 300,000 people in conflict zones

across the Middle East after authorities in **Libya's** capital reported the **first case** in the war-torn country.

The Norwegian Refugee Council said it was unable to reach people in Syria, Yemen and the Gaza Strip, where authorities have imposed strict measures to halt the spread of the virus. All have fragile health care systems that could be overwhelmed by an outbreak, and only Yemen has yet to report any cases.

The group said virus **lockdowns have also limited access** to parts of Africa and Asia.

“While governments are taking tough and much-needed measures to prevent the spread of coronavirus, millions of refugees and displaced people still depend on humanitarian assistance,” said Jan Egeland, head of the aid group.

“If supermarkets and pharmacies can remain operational during this crisis, then so should the delivery of humanitarian aid,” he added.

For most people, the new coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough that clear up in two to three weeks. For some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness, including pneumonia and death. The virus is highly contagious and can be spread by those showing no symptoms.

Countries across the **Middle East have imposed sweeping measures to prevent its spread**, including closing their borders, canceling flights and in some cases imposing round-the-clock curfews that confine people to their homes.

The government on Wednesday approved new restrictions, including the closure of all synagogues. Authorities across the region have already **shuttered major holy sites** sacred to Christians, Muslims and Jews.

Many in ultra-Orthodox communities have defied restrictions on public gatherings, despite the pleas of rabbis and local authorities. That has led to tension with authorities and in at least one case, scuffles with police. Municipal workers also have been **urging the ultra-Orthodox to go home, with little effect**.

The order to close the synagogues, which goes into effect later Wednesday, reportedly came over the objection of Health Minister Yaakov Litzman, himself an ultra-Orthodox Jew.

Twenty-nine percent of those who contracted the virus in Israel were infected in a synagogue or a yeshiva, according to an analysis by the National Information and Knowledge Center for the Fight Against the Coronavirus, which has been advising the Health Ministry.

The new restrictions in Israel will **bar most people from venturing more than 100 meters (yards) from their homes**. More than 2,000 Israelis have been infected, with 37 in serious condition. Five elderly Israelis with pre-existing medical conditions have died.

The Palestinian Authority, which governs parts of the Israeli-occupied West Bank, has ordered a full lockdown and halted travel between cities, towns and villages. **Sixty cases** have been reported in the **West Bank and another two in Gaza**.

Late Tuesday, hundreds of people in the northern West Bank town of Jenin, including dozens of armed men, defied the restrictions when they held a rally to celebrate the release of a Palestinian prisoner from an Israeli jail.

Also late Tuesday, the Palestinian Authority ordered all Palestinian workers to return to the West Bank from Israel, which had allowed around 65,000 to stay and work during the crisis.

Many **Palestinians** work in construction, agriculture and manufacturing in Israel. Wages in Israel are much higher than in the Palestinian territories.

In Libya, officials say a 73-year-old man who entered from neighboring Tunisia on March 5 tested positive. The Libyan patient had recently traveled to Saudi Arabia, according to Libya's National Center for Disease Control, and was receiving medical treatment for his fever and cough in isolation at a Tripoli hospital.

Libya has been mired in chaos since the 2011 uprising that overthrew and killed longtime dictator Moammar Gadhafi. It is governed by rival authorities based in Tripoli and eastern Libya whose forces have been battling over the capital for nearly a year. Each is supported by a patchwork of armed groups.

On Tuesday, Tripoli's suburbs came under heavy fire even as the United Nations appealed for a truce so authorities could focus on preventing the spread of the coronavirus.

In neighboring Egypt, Prime Minister Moustafa Madbouly said a nationwide curfew from 7 p.m. until 6 a.m. would go into effect Wednesday. Egypt has confirmed 402 cases and 22 fatalities, including two senior military officers who were involved in efforts to disinfect public places.

Saudi Arabia, meanwhile, **expanded its curfew hours for the cities of Mecca and Medina**, home to Islam's holiest sites, as well as the capital, Riyadh. Residents now must remain **inside their homes from 3 p.m.** — instead of from 7 p.m. — to 6 a.m. The kingdom also banned travel in or out of the three governorates. Saudi Arabia, despite taking early measures to curb the outbreak, has reported 676 cases.

Pakistan **halted all domestic passenger flights beginning Thursday** after reporting nearly 1,000 cases. It had previously **suspended train service and international flights**. The outbreak in Pakistan was initially confined to people who had recently traveled to Iran but now appears to be circulating among those with no recent travel history.

Iran is battling the worst outbreak in the region, with over 27,000 confirmed cases and a **death toll of at least 2,077**, Health Ministry spokesman Kianoush Jahanpour said Wednesday.