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Israel's coronavirus death toll up to 132

Confirmed cases stand at 12,501; 180 in serious condition, out of which 133 receiving ventilator support; residents of Arab towns in Galilee asked to stay indoors amid spike in virus infections

Ynet| Updated: 04.15.20 , 23:28

Israel's coronavirus death toll rose to 132, with confirmed cases standing at 12,501, health authorities confirmed Wednesday.

Among the latest figures are 180 patients in serious condition, including 133 patients receiving ventilator support.

At least 174 patients are in moderate condition, while 9,454 only display mild symptoms and 2,563 patients have made a full recovery from the virus.

There are currently 649 coronavirus patients receiving treatment in hospitals while 7,277 people are fighting the virus at home. Another 1,238 people are currently receiving treatment in specially designated hotels and 644 are awaiting a decision on whether they will be treated.

The Health Ministry on Wednesday morning asked residents of the Arab village Deir al-Asad, in the Galilee region, to remain in their homes due to an "unusually high rate" of coronavirus spread in the community.

The residents of the neighboring villages of Majd al-Krum, Bi'ina and Nahf were also asked to stay indoors.

As of Wednesday morning, there are 23 confirmed cases in Deir al-Asad, four in Nahf, three in Bi'ina and one in Majd al-Krum. Deir al-Asad has a population of over 12,000 people. The Health Ministry said the epidemiological investigation of the cases indicates there could be "hundreds" of potential infections in the area.

04.15.20 – We - - -

Some stores & special ed classes may open Sunday, after data is examined

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Some stores could open as early as Sunday, says PM aide

Avi Simhon, PM's chief financial advisor, says cabinet working on exit plan, but assessment period still needed as new data comes in, but first measure is resuming special ed classes on April 19; Simhon praises Israelis' adherence to directives, which he says helped reduce spread

Alexandra Lukash Published: 04.15.20 , 21:18

Some stores in Israel could open as soon as Sunday, says Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's chief financial advisor, Prof. Avi Simhon, as the cabinet prepared to meet Thursday to discuss the exit plan for the coronavirus crisis.

With the exception of supermarkets and pharmacies, all shops in Israel have been shut for weeks as part of efforts to combat the spread of the highly infectious virus.

Simhon said that starting from Sunday, local shops will start to reopen gradually, but warned that data showing the result of such action takes weeks to be gathered.

"We will examine the data in the weeks after [the reopenings] to decide the next plan of action," he said this week.

"We can't talk about specific dates," said Simhon. "There are talks between the Finance Ministry, the Bank of Israel and the Health Ministry."

"The person to give the final word is Netanyahu – we will hold further talks with him and he will decide what, when and how."

Simhon stressed that there is not one clear plan and that as more data comes in, the prime minister will calculate the correct strategy.

He said that the aim was also to reopen malls after the local stores, "but that's going to take time."

"I project it will not happen in April, but maybe in May, it all depends on the numbers and citizens' discipline to directives," he said. "We also want to free up the restrictions on offices, high-tech companies and industry."

Simhon said, however, that the issue currently not on the table is immediately restarting the education system.

"It's probably not going to happen next week," he said. "Some say we don't need to do anything next week, but we [Netanyahu's advisers] think otherwise."

Education, health and finance experts have been working in recent days on a number of plans to facilitate the reopening of schools, trying to find common ground.

He said that "the main issue with such an action is that even if it's small groups of students, one infected person can infect everyone else, and in turn they can infect their families and we have a mass spread of the virus.

"One of the most important decisions we have to make is about special ed classes, but whether classes reopen or not is again up to the prime minister, and he still hasn't made a decision on the matter."

Simhon echoed Education Ministry Director-General Shmuel Abuav, who this week wrote to Education Ministry officials that students would only study in small groups in well-ventilated areas.

"If schools do open, it will not be in the same manner to which we were accustomed," said Simhon. "They will be opened gradually. We are thinking of having parents get together to watch over [groups of] kids to free one another up to go to work, but allowing them go to school as they did a month ago is going to take time."

Simhon also praised Israelis' adherence to public health directives.

"Many had expected that they wouldn't listen to them, but that has not been the case," he said.

"People have shown a lot of discipline, the result of which is the decline of confirmed patients over the past two weeks – which we believe will allow the shelter-at-home order to be lifted."

The only part of such a plan already approved is for special ed students to return to school on April 19, but in a staggered manner.

With regards to restaurants, cinemas and sporting events, Simhon said that the cabinet is trying to work out a way to allow them somehow to return to normalcy in the near future.

"I don't know how a restaurant can function with a mandatory two-meter distance between the tables, we're trying to figure these things out," he said.

"We must ask ourselves how we get out of this lockdown bit by bit, act with caution so far and not lose control over the situation."

04.15.20 – We - - -

Israel drone strikes Hezbollah commander vehicle near Syria-Lebanon border

04.15.20 – We - - -

Israel targets Hezbollah vehicle near Syria-Lebanon border

Sources say the passengers escaped the car before it was hit and destroyed by an Israeli drone; Sky News Arabia reported the vehicle was carrying a commander belonging to the Lebanese terror group

Daniel Salami | Published: 04.15.20 , 15:15

An Israeli drone targeted a car carrying forces from Iran-backed Hezbollah in Syria near the Lebanese border, a commander in the pro-Damascus regional alliance and a security source said.

The sources said there were no casualties, with the passengers escaping before the car was hit and destroyed.

Sky News Arabia reported the targeted vehicle was carrying a commander belonging to the Lebanese terror group.

Pictures from the scene of the attack showed the remains of the burned down vehicle covered by a doormat. This method of covering tracks is widely used by Hezbollah fighters in order to avoid being detected by spy drones.

Over the recent days, Israel has increased its presence in the Lebanese and Syrian airspace.

Hezbollah has not commented on the incident.

In the meantime, on Tuesday evening an Iranian military plane was detected flying over Iraq on its way to Tehran. The plane's altitude and trajectory would indicate it was coming back from Damascus.

04.14.20 – Tu - - -

Netanyahu, Gantz unity talks extended to 16th, or parliament will pick a candidate

04.14.20 – Tu - - -

Netanyahu, Gantz say near unity deal as Rivlin extends mandate

PM and Blue & White leader say they've made 'significant progress' following an overnight meeting, prompting the president to extend Gantz's 28-day mandate to form coalition by 2 extra days

Reuters | Published: 04.14.20 , 08:28

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his main rival Benny Gantz were nearing a deal on Tuesday to form a national emergency government to battle the coronavirus crisis and end the country's unprecedented political deadlock.

Gantz's 28-day mandate to put together a ruling coalition after last month's inconclusive election was due to expire at midnight, but President Reuven Rivlin, who is overseeing the coalition talks, extended it for two days.

Rivlin did so, his office said, "on the understanding that they are very close to reaching an agreement."

Gantz and Netanyahu met overnight in a last-ditch effort to settle their differences. Afterwards they issued a joint statement saying they had made "significant progress." The two are set to meet again with their negotiating teams later in the morning. The impasse, after national elections in April and September 2019 and again last month, raised the prospect of a fourth ballot, complicating any plans for economic recovery once the coronavirus outbreak eases.

Without a deal, it will be up to parliament to pick a candidate who would then have 14 days to form a government. Failure to do so would automatically trigger a snap election. "Netanyahu, this is our moment of truth. It's either a national emergency government or, God forbid, a fourth election which would be expensive and, in this crisis period, gratuitous," Gantz said late on Monday in broadcast remarks.

Gantz said the enormity of the coronavirus emergency had caused him to break a campaign promise not to sit in a government with Netanyahu, who has been indicted on corruption charges.

Netanyahu, who has headed successive caretaker administrations during the political stalemate, denies the charges.

In his own televised statement, the veteran premier imposed a ban on inter-city travel for the final days of the Passover holiday this week to stem the spread of the coronavirus. Restrictions already in place have confined most Israelis to their homes for weeks, forcing many businesses to close and sending unemployment soaring to more than 25%.

Netanyahu said his cabinet could formulate an "exit strategy" as soon as this weekend, though he cautioned restrictions on the economy and education would be eased gradually and that there would be no full return to routine before a coronavirus vaccine is discovered.

04.15.20 – We - - -

Iran virus death toll 4,777 count only those in hospitals, not victims in homes

04.15.20 – We - - -

Iran parliament: Virus deaths nearly double reported figures

Report says number of infected could be 8-10 times larger, which — if true — would make the Islamic Republic the country with highest number of infections in the world

Associated Press| Published: 04.15.20 , 19:11

The death toll in Iran from the coronavirus pandemic is likely nearly double the officially reported figures, due to undercounting and because not everyone with breathing problems has been tested for the virus, a parliament report said.

Iranian health officials offered no comment on the report, which represents the highest-level charge yet from within the Islamic Republic's government of its figures being questionable, something long suspected by international experts. Iran on Wednesday put the death toll at 4,777, out of 76,389 confirmed cases of the virus — still making it the Mideast's worst outbreak by far.

The report, released Tuesday, comes as Iranian President Hassan Rouhani continues to push for a slow reopening of the country's economy, which remains targeted by crushing U.S. sanctions. If its own figures offered to the World Health Organization are wrong, it adds to fears by some that encouraging people to return to work will spark a second wave of infections.

"In order to have more compatibility between protocol and estimated statistics, it is necessary to increase laboratory and testing capabilities in the country," the report said. "Needless to say that through increasing the capacities, diagnosis of disease will be more possible and spread of the disease will be more limited."

The 46-page report by Iran's parliament research center, published online, carries the weight of being written by nonpartisan experts within the country. Already, hard-liners have seized on Rouhani's handling of the pandemic to criticize him and his administration, which is held in poor regard after his 2015 nuclear deal with world powers collapsed due to President Donald Trump's move that unilaterally withdrew the U.S. from the accord.

The explosive charge was merely a footnote on page 6 in what appeared to be an otherwise routine report.

It said Health Ministry death toll figures counted only those who died in hospitals and had gotten positive test results for the virus. That disregarded all coronavirus victims who died in their homes. The report also said that aggressive testing, something experts have seized upon as necessary in the pandemic, has not been done in Iran — meaning other cases likely have been missed. It suggested the true death toll in Iran is probably 80% higher than figures now given, or nearly double.

As far as the positive cases are involved, and given the undertesting, the number of people infected is probably "eight to 10 times" higher than the reported figures, the report said.

If correct, the report's worst-case figures would put Iran's death toll potential as high over 8,500, with some 760,000 total cases. That would catapult Iran to the country with the highest number of infections in the world.

The U.S. has over 600,000 confirmed cases, according to figures from Johns Hopkins University, though experts believe that number likely is larger as well.

International experts long have suggested they suspected Iran's numbers as its mortality was higher than other nations. While other countries also have seen cases spike, Iran's reported numbers so far have offered a gradual slope.

The report also accused authorities of not providing its authors with "detailed figures" over the disease. It also warned that more than 30,000 people could die if strict quarantine measures aren't taken.

Last week, lawmaker Reza Shiran from the northeastern holy city of Mashhad, said that there had "been no correct reporting on the death toll." He alleged official reports instead labeled deaths as coming from an "acute respiratory syndrome."

Deputy Health Minister Ali Reza Raisi on Wednesday acknowledged that the "limits of testing" faced by Iran means it doesn't have accurate figures of all those infected.

"The real figures are more than the official statistics but it is not correct to multiply official figures by two or three," he said, without elaborating or directly addressing the parliament report.

Also on Wednesday, Iran canceled ceremonies marking the anniversary of the death of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic over virus concerns, the official IRNA news agency reported.

The cancellation of the early June ceremonies underscored Iranian officials' expectation that the virus crisis will continue for several more weeks.

04.13.20 – Mo - - -

China's virus high, mandating 28 day quarantine for all arrivals from abroad

04.13.20 – Mo - - -

China's new coronavirus cases near 6-week high, Russian border new battleground
China reports a total of 108 new COVID-19 cases on Monday, up from 99 a day earlier, marking the highest jump in infections since March 5; most of the newly-infected enter China from Russian towns bordering Heilongjiang province

Reuters| Published: 04.13.20 , 09:22

China's northeast Heilongjiang province which borders Russia has become the new battleground against the coronavirus as authorities reported the highest number of new daily cases in nearly six weeks, driven by infected travelers from overseas.

China fears a rise in imported cases could spark a second wave of COVID-19 and push the country back into a state of near paralysis.

A total of 108 new coronavirus cases were reported in mainland China on Sunday, up from 99 a day earlier and marking the highest number of cases since 143 infections were reported on March 5.

The National Health Commission said 98 of the new cases were imported, a new record. A total of 49 Chinese nationals who entered Heilongjiang province from Russia tested positive.

"Our little town here, we thought it was the safest place," said a resident of the border city of Suifenhe, who only gave his surname as Zhu.

"Some Chinese citizens they want to come back, but it's not very sensible, what are you doing coming here for?"

Though the number of daily infections across China has dropped sharply from the height of the epidemic in February, China has seen the daily toll creep higher after hitting a trough on March 12 because of the rise in imported cases.

Chinese cities near the border with Russia are tightening border controls and imposing stricter quarantines in response to influx of infected patients from the country. Suifenhe last week announced restrictions on movements and gatherings similar to those imposed in Wuhan city, where the coronavirus outbreak first emerged late last year, and extended the closure of its border with Russia.

The land route through the city had become one of few options available for Chinese nationals trying to get into China after Russia stopped all flights to the country.

Suifenhe and Harbin, capital of Heilongjiang, are now mandating 28 days of quarantine for all arrivals from abroad as well as nucleic acid and antibody tests.

Streets in Suifenhe were virtually empty on Sunday evening due to restrictions of movement. Residents said a lot of people had left the city as the number of infected people crossing the border from Russia rose.

"I don't need to worry," Zhao Wei, another Suifenhe resident, said. "If there's a local transmission, I would, but there's not a single one. They're all from the border, but they've all been sent to quarantine."

04.15.20 – We - - -

Trump ends 900 million US aid 90 days, to review WHO failed its basic duty

04.15.20 – We - - -

Trump ends U.S. aid to WHO, says not enough done to stop coronavirus

The American president accuses the World Health Organization of not investigating the reports about COVID-19 when the pathogen first surfaced in China; U.S. contributed nearly \$900 million to the WHO's budget for 2018-19

Associated Press| Published: 04.15.20 , 08:38

President Donald Trump said he was cutting off U.S. payments to the World Health Organization during the coronavirus pandemic, accusing the organization of failing to do enough to stop the virus from spreading when it first surfaced in China.

Trump, who had telegraphed his intentions last week, claimed the outbreak could have been contained at its source and that lives could have been saved had the U.N. health agency done a better job investigating the early reports coming out of China. “The WHO failed in its basic duty and must be held accountable,” Trump said at a Tuesday briefing. He said the U.S. would be reviewing the WHO’s actions to stop the virus before making any decision on resuming aid.

There was no immediate comment from the Geneva-based organization on Trump’s announcement. But when asked about possible U.S. funding cuts during a regular U.N. briefing earlier Tuesday, WHO spokeswoman Margaret Harris responded, “Regardless of any issues, our work will go on.”

U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres responded to Trump’s announcement by saying now is not the time to end support for the World Health Organization, calling the WHO “absolutely critical” to the global effort to combat COVID-19, the disease caused by the coronavirus.

Guterres said that it is possible that different entities read the facts differently but that the appropriate time for a review is “once we have finally turned the page on this pandemic.” “But now is not that time,” he said, adding that it also is not the time to reduce resources for operations at the WHO or any other humanitarian group that is working to combat the virus.

The United States contributed nearly \$900 million to the WHO’s budget for 2018-19, according to information on the agency’s website. That represents one-fifth of its total \$4.4 billion budget for those years. The U.S. gave nearly three-fourths of the funds in “specified voluntary contributions” and the rest in “assessed” funding as part of Washington’s commitment to U.N. institutions.

A more detailed WHO budget document provided by the U.S. mission in Geneva showed that in 2019, the United States provided \$452 million, including nearly \$119 million in assessed funding. In its most recent budget proposal from February, the Trump administration called for slashing the U.S. assessed funding contribution to the WHO to \$57.9 million.

More than 125,000 deaths worldwide, including more than 25,000 in the U.S., have been blamed on the coronavirus, according to Johns Hopkins University.

Last week, Trump blasted the WHO for being “China-centric” and alleging that it had “criticized” his ban on travel from China as the COVID-19 outbreak was spreading from the city of Wuhan.

The WHO generally takes care not to criticize countries on their national policies, and it was not immediately clear what specific criticism Trump was alluding to.

Trump himself showed deference to China at the beginning stages of the outbreak.

“China has been working very hard to contain the Coronavirus,” he tweeted Jan. 24. “The United States greatly appreciates their efforts and transparency. It will all work out well. In particular, on behalf of the American People, I want to thank President Xi!”

Asked Tuesday about the appropriateness of seeking to cut the WHO’s funding in the middle of a worldwide viral outbreak, Trump said the review would last 60 to 90 days.

“This is an evaluation period, but in the meantime, we’re putting a hold on all funds going to World Health,” Trump said. He said the U.S. will continue to engage with the WHO in pursuit of “meaningful reforms.”

Trump has also complained that other countries give substantially less than the U.S., singling out China.

The American Medical Association immediately called on Trump to reconsider his decision.

“During the worst public health crisis in a century, halting funding to the World Health Organization is a dangerous step in the wrong direction that will not make defeating COVID-19 easier,” AMA President Patrice A. Harris said in a statement.

Harris said international cooperation is needed to fight the virus, along with science and data.

“Cutting funding to the WHO, rather than focusing on solutions, is a dangerous move at a precarious moment for the world,” she said.

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