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WORLD NEWS APRIL 10, 2020 / 10:48 AM / 3 MONTHS AGO

War-ravaged Yemen confirms first coronavirus case, braces for more

Mohammed Ghobari

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ADEN (Reuters) - Yemen reported its first coronavirus case on Friday as aid groups braced for an outbreak in a country where war has shattered health systems and spread hunger and disease.

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A view of a deserted street, during a curfew after the state's first case of coronavirus disease (COVID-19), was announced, in al-Sheher, Hadhramout province, Yemen April 10, 2020. Picture taken through a car window. REUTERS/Ibrahim al-Bakri

The news of the laboratory-confirmed case came after a nationwide ceasefire prompted by the virus pandemic began on Thursday. A Saudi-led coalition fighting Yemen's Houthi movement said it would halt military operations for two weeks, though the Houthis have yet to follow suit.

A 60-year-old Yemeni man was diagnosed in the southern oil-producing region of Hadhramout, an area controlled by Yemen's internationally-recognised government, the supreme national emergency committee said.

Spokesman Ali al-Walidi told a news conference the man, who works in the small port of Ash Shihr, was in stable condition at a quarantine centre.

Authorities have ordered the closure of Ash Shihr port for a week for deep cleaning and instructed workers there to isolate themselves at home for two weeks, according to a directive seen by Reuters.

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borders with Hadhramout as of Friday.

If the virus spreads in Yemen, the impact would be “catastrophic”, its U.N. humanitarian coordinator Lise Grande had told Reuters, as the health status of at least half the population is “very degraded” and the country does not have sufficient supplies or facilities.

“This is one of the biggest threats in the past 100 years to face Yemen,” Grande said in a statement on Friday. “It’s time for the parties to stop fighting each other and start fighting COVID together.”

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The World Health Organization (WHO) said it was providing support to Yemen’s health ministry.

“We are following the case and its contacts to assess the level of exposure,” Yemen representative Altaf Musani said.

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Yemen's five-year-long war has killed more than 100,000 people and triggered a humanitarian crisis. Only half of its hospitals are fully functional and 18 million people do not have access to proper hygiene, water and sanitation, the International Rescue Committee says.

Cholera, dengue and malaria are rife. Around 80% of Yemenis, or 24 million people, rely on humanitarian aid while millions live on the brink of starvation and are vulnerable to disease.

Al-Walidi earlier told Reuters that quarantine centres had been set up in Hadhramout, Al Mahra and Aden in the south.

He said the government committee was requesting ventilators, oxygen tanks and hospital beds from the WHO in coordination with Saudi Arabia's King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Center to be divided between areas under control of the Saudi-backed government and those held by the Houthi movement.

Slideshow (2 Images)

The Houthis, who ousted the Saudi-backed government from power in the capital Sanaa in late 2014, control most big urban areas. They have set up a quarantine centre at a Sanaa hospital and one in Sanaa Airport.

The United Nations is trying to set up virtual talks among the warring parties to discuss a permanent truce, a coordinated coronavirus response, humanitarian and economic confidence-building steps and the resumption of peace negotiations.

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concerns that Houthi authorities were hindering aid deliveries. The WFP feeds more than 12 million Yemenis a month, mostly in Houthi areas.

Houthi authorities have complained about mismanagement of aid programmes by international bodies.

A U.S. State Department official told reporters in a teleconference on Thursday that the onus was on the Houthis.

“We encourage them to, one, join the ceasefire; and two, to end their problematic humanitarian practices,” said David Schenker, assistant secretary for Near Eastern affairs.

(Interactive graphic tracking global spread of coronavirus: open tmsnrt.rs/3aIRuz7 in an external browser.)

(This story has been refiled to remove repeated paragraphs at end of first section)

Reporting by Mohammed Ghobari, Mohammed Mokhashef and Reuters TV team, Lisa Barrington, Humeyra Pamuk and Samar Hassan; Writing by Ghaida Ghantous; Editing by Clarence Fernandez, Gareth Jones and Hugh Lawson

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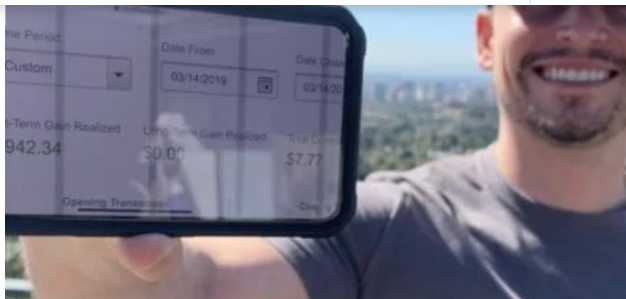
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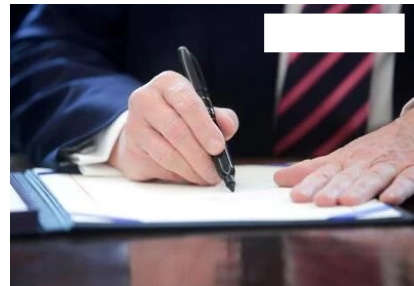
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