

Bethlehem under lockdown after virus cases confirmed

March 6 2020

The city of Bethlehem was under lockdown on Friday after the first Palestinian cases of the deadly coronavirus were discovered there and authorities announced a state of emergency.

Palestinian Health Minister Mai al-Kaila said a total of 16 cases of the COVID-19 illness had been detected in the Israeli-occupied West Bank after nine new cases were discovered in Bethlehem, official Palestinian news agency Wafa reported Friday evening.

The Palestinian government announced a month-long state of emergency late Thursday after the first seven cases were identified, while the Israeli defence ministry said it had imposed emergency measures on Bethlehem, with everybody "forbidden from entering or leaving the city".

It added that the lockdown had been imposed "in coordination with the Palestinian Authority".

The Church of the Nativity, built on the site Christians believe was the birthplace of Jesus, was closed on Thursday and along with other sites is expected to be shuttered for a month.

All tourist buses to and from Bethlehem were banned until further notice, Israeli police spokesman Micky Rosenfeld said.

An AFP journalist saw around 20 buses stuck at a checkpoint run by

Israeli personnel at the entrance to the Palestinian city, which is around 10 kilometres (six miles) south of Israeli-controlled Jerusalem.

Witnesses said some tourists in Bethlehem were trying to bypass military controls in order to reach Jerusalem.

The streets of Bethlehem and Ramallah, where the Palestinian government is based, were near-empty on Friday morning, with most shops closed, AFP journalists said.

Israel controls all entrances to the West Bank from the Jewish state but the Palestinian government has limited autonomy in cities.

Palestinian Prime Minister Mohammed Shtayyeh made a special broadcast late Thursday to announce the 30-day lockdown, saying the measures were essential to contain the disease.

All but essential travel between Palestinian governorates was now prohibited, while all schools and educational facilities would close, he said.

Public parks and tourist sites would close while large sporting events, conferences and other major gatherings were cancelled, Shtayyeh added.

The Palestinian health ministry said the cases had first been detected at a hotel in the Bethlehem area.

Church of Nativity disinfected

The emergency measures came after the first Palestinian cases were confirmed Thursday afternoon.

The seven people initially found to be infected were being treated in

quarantine, the Palestinian health ministry had said.

The head of the local health directorate, Imad Shahadeh, told AFP that a group of Greek tourists had visited the hotel in late February, with two later diagnosed with the virus.

A number of suspected cases have since been identified among hotel workers, he said.

Asbed Balian, senior cleric of the Armenian church at the Church of the Nativity, said infected visitors had entered the site.

"People affected by corona visited the church," he told AFP.

Workmen began spraying disinfectant inside the church on Thursday evening, an AFP photographer said.

COGAT, the Israeli body responsible for civilian activities in the Palestinian Territories, said it was "working closely with the Palestinian Authority" to stem the spread of the virus.

Israel, which so far has 21 confirmed cases, has imposed stringent measures on many European nations in a bid to contain the virus.

It has also scrapped joint military exercises with the United States in Germany.

The Israeli army announced that from noon Friday all forces would be prevented from leaving Israel, whether "on personal trips or on duty".

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