

Coronavirus testing to start within days in NW Syria: WHO

March 23 2020

Testing for the novel coronavirus is to start within days in northwest Syria, the World Health Organisation said Monday, amid fears of a disaster if the pandemic reached overcrowded displacement camps.

Some three million people are trapped in the rebel enclave of Idlib in the country's northwest, where infections have yet to be detected.

Of those residents, around one million have been displaced since December as Syria's last major rebel bastion has been battered by a government offensive.

A fragile ceasefire has held since the start of the month, but a large number of people continue to live in tent camps and makeshift housing along the Turkish border, where basic hygiene is lacking.

Concern for all those people was heightened after the Damascus government on Sunday announced the country's first official case of the novel [coronavirus](#).

"Testing will be available in Idlib in two days," WHO spokesman Hedinn Halldorsson said on Monday.

Some 300 COVID-19 diagnostic kits are to be delivered to a laboratory in Idlib city on Wednesday and "testing should start shortly afterwards," he said.

An additional 2,000 tests would be delivered as soon as possible, he added.

Technicians in Idlib have been trained to use the kits and laboratories in neighbouring Turkey would also be on standby to help if needed.

As part of a wider response plan for the region, three hospitals with intensive care units have been modified as isolation units equipped with ventilators, the WHO spokesman said.

Up to 1,000 [healthcare workers](#) have been mobilised and a new delivery of protective gear—including 10,000 [surgical masks](#) and 500 respirator masks—should arrive within the week.

'Extremely concerned'

So far three suspected cases in northwest Syria have tested negative after hospitals sent samples to Turkey, Halldorsson said, but concern remains high.

"WHO is extremely concerned about the impact COVID-19 may have in the northwest," Halldorsson said.

"Displaced people (there) live under conditions that make them vulnerable to respiratory infections," he told AFP.

Those included overcrowded living conditions, physical and mental stress, as well as lack of housing, food and clean water.

Syria's war has killed more than 380,000 people, displaced millions and ravaged the country's infrastructure since starting in 2011 with anti-government protests.

Late last year, less than two-thirds of the country's hospitals were functioning, while 70 percent of health workers had fled the country, WHO says.

Over the past week, the Damascus authorities have taken increased measures to stem the spread of the virus.

Schools universities and restaurants have been closed and prayer gatherings suspended.

Travellers from affected countries are banned from entering the country and the land border was closed with Lebanon, where 256 people are infected and four have died from the virus.

The Kurdish authorities in northeast Syria have not recorded any deaths so far, but have imposed a curfew in a bid to stem any outbreak.

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