

Saudi implements dusk-to-dawn curfew over coronavirus

March 23 2020

Streets in Riyadh were deserted Monday as Saudi Arabia implemented a nationwide dusk-to-dawn curfew to limit the spread of the new coronavirus, the latest in a series of restrictions as infections soar.

Police cars warned people over loudspeakers to stay off the streets after the 11-hour curfew went into effect at 7 pm (1600 GMT) following a royal order from King Salman.

The curfew, which state media said will be imposed for 21 days, comes as Saudi Arabia reported 562 infections—the highest in the Gulf. The kingdom has reported no deaths so far.

Transgressors will be fined 10,000 Saudi riyals (\$2,663) and could face jail for repeated breaches, the interior ministry said.

Health sector employees as well as security and military officials will be exempt from the curfew restrictions, according to the royal order.

King Salman warned on Thursday of a "more difficult" fight ahead against the virus, as the kingdom faces the double blow of virus-led shutdowns and crashing oil prices.

The Arab world's biggest economy has closed down cinemas, malls and restaurants, halted flights and suspended the year-round umrah pilgrimage as it steps up efforts to contain the deadly virus.

Last week, the kingdom unveiled stimulus measures amounting to 120 billion riyals to support businesses and said it plans to raise borrowing to 50 percent of GDP.

Saudi Arabia has also suspended prayers inside all its mosques except the holiest two sites in Islam in Mecca and Medina, a sensitive move in the deeply conservative Muslim kingdom.

The world's top crude exporter faces plunging oil prices, the mainstay of government revenue, which have slipped to around \$25 a barrel to touch multi-year lows on the back of sagging demand due to the virus and a price war with Russia.

More than 1,300 coronavirus infections have been detected in the Gulf region, with most cases initially identified among travellers returning from Iran—one of the world's worst affected countries.

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