

25 virus suspects on Nile cruise boat test negative in Egypt

March 10 2020

Egyptian authorities said Tuesday that 25 people who had initially tested positive for the novel coronavirus during a Nile River cruise had since tested negative.

Health Minister Hala Zayed told journalists in Cairo that tests on 26 people in Egypt had "changed from positive to negative" for the COVID-19 illness, including "25 who had been on the A-Sara boat".

They would, however, have to complete a quarantine period before leaving the hospital where they are currently staying, she added, without specifying for how long.

On Monday night, the health ministry said the total number of confirmed cases in Egypt had risen to 59, including three more Egyptians and a foreign woman.

Egyptian authorities had on Saturday reported moving 45 suspected cases—33 passengers and 12 crew—from the stricken cruise boat into isolation at Marsa Matrouh, a resort town on the Mediterranean coast.

The scores of others who remained on the boat, including American, French and Indian travellers and Egyptian crew, had been quarantined on board, passengers told AFP.

AFP reporters on Tuesday saw passengers milling about on the top deck of the boat, docked on the Nile at Luxor in southern Egypt.

Zayed noted that her ministry had taken "random samples" from tourists and staff at all of Luxor and Aswan's hotels. The tests had come back with "100 percent" negative results.

'Virus isn't going to stop me'

At the sun-drenched Karnak Temple in Luxor, large groups of Americans, British, German and Mexican tourists among others snapped selfies while leaning on towering columns with chiseled hieroglyphics.

Hardly any tourists donned a protective mask at the historic site on Tuesday.

"Honestly, it (coronavirus) is starting to freak me out a little bit," said Victoria Benfeito-Cordeiro, a 22-year-old nursing student from Canada.

"Even some locals aren't approaching because they think I might have corona... but it still didn't make me not want to come here (Egypt)," she told AFP.

The Canadian said she was cautious of nature even before the virus outbreak.

"I'm kind of a germaphobe so I'm always carrying hand sanitiser all the time and when I go on the bus I put on a scarf (around my mouth) just to make sure I don't come into contact with others," she said.

"But I try not to think about it," she casually added.

Tourism Minister Khaled el-Enany spoke of "a decline in tourism globally including in Egypt, but our rates aren't as severe as other countries".

Speaking alongside Zayed, he said his ministry had focused its efforts on Luxor and Aswan "because the sole (virus) problem we have is on a Nile cruise boat".

For tour guide Hassan Rady, 52, the situation is far from dire.

After leading a multi-lingual tour group, he was confident that the scare from the global epidemic would subside.

"I am optimistic and it (the disease) is not going to stop me from going to work," he said, seated on a bench near a large Pharaonic statue at sunset.

"The authorities know what they're doing because this is a matter of life and death. It's a national security problem," Rady said.

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