Yemen has 1st confirmed virus case, more than 10k in Israel

April 10 2020, by Maggie Michael

A medical staff member adjusts the sheets on a bed as personnel setup a coronavirus quarantine ward at a hospital in Sanaa, Yemen, Sunday, March 15, 2020. (AP Photo/Hani Mohammed)

Yemen's internationally recognized government Friday announced the

first confirmed case of coronavirus in the war-torn country, stoking fears that an outbreak could devastate an already crippled health care system.

Yemen's Minister of Health Nasser Baoum told The Associated Press the case is a 73-year-old Yemeni national who works at the al-Shahr port in Hadramawt province. He added that he is in a stable condition, without further details.

Yemen is a uniquely dangerous place for the coronavirus to spread. Repeated bombings and ground fighting over five years of war have destroyed or closed more than half its health facilities. Deep poverty, dire water shortages and a lack of adequate sanitation have made the country a breeding ground for disease.

The Saudi-led coalition fighting the Iran-backed Houthi rebels declared a cease-fire on Thursday on humanitarian grounds to prevent the spread of the pandemic. However, fighting continued unabated Friday, diminishing hopes that a halt in the fighting will open doors for peace talks.

Yemen's war erupted in 2014, when the Houthis seized the capital Sanaa and much of the country's north. The U.S.-backed, Saudi-led coalition intervened to oust the rebels and restore the internationally recognized government. The conflict has killed over 100,000 people and largely settled into a bloody stalemate.

Yemeni women work to manufacture protective face masks, that are in high demand worldwide due the outbreak of the coronavirus, at a textile factory in Sanaa, Yemen, Tuesday, Mar. 17, 2020. For most people, the virus causes only mild or moderate symptoms. For some it can cause more severe illness. (AP Photo/Hani Mohammed)

The U.N. has described Yemen as the world's worst humanitarian disaster. Cholera outbreaks are the worst in modern history. Over 24 million people in the country require humanitarian assistance, many of them on the brink of starvation.

Even before the war, the southern province of Hadramawt saw some of the worst pockets of malnutrition and disease in the country. It recently witnessed an outbreak of dengue fever, with hundreds of cases filling the

public hospital of al-Shahr, where the coronavirus was detected.

In Yemen's under-equipped and barely functioning health system, it's hard to distinguish between viral diseases. One young man with dengue fever died after a hospital in Mukalla, the provincial capital of Hadramawt, refused to admit him for fear he was carrying the coronavirus, two local aid and government officers said. They spoke on condition of anonymity because they weren't authorized to speak to the press.

Some of the symptoms of dengue fever are similar to the coronavirus, including muscle aches and and fever.

To try to curb the spread of the virus, provincial Gov. Farag al-Bouhsni announced on his Facebook page a partial curfew. He also placed all workers at one of the area's key ports, Al-Shahr, under a 14-day quarantine. Residents criticized the governor for not shutting down all the ports Hadramawt which are the main lifeline of aid and commercial shipments for southern Yemen. The adjacent governorate of al-Mahra, which also borders Oman, sealed off its entry points just hours after the announcement of the first case in Yemen.

In this Monday, Jan. 25, 2016 photo, men inspect a house destroyed by a Saudi-led airstrike in Sanaa, Yemen. The missile fired by the Saudi-led coalition killed a judge and his entire family in the Nahda neighborhood, security officials said. The judge was a known Houthi supporter. On Wednesday, April 8, 2020, the Saudi-led coalition fighting the Iranian-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen announced that its forces would begin a cease-fire starting at midnight, in what could pave the way for the first direct peace talks between the two sides that have been at war for more than five years. (AP Photo/Hani Mohammed)

Experts have dreaded the virus' eventual appearance in the country.

"The arrival of coronavirus in Yemen will be disastrous for many reasons," said Altaf Musani, representative of the World Health Organization in Yemen.

In Israel, the number of coronavirus infections has risen to more than 10,000. The government imposed strict measures to contain the pandemic early on but has seen it tear through the insular ultra-Orthodox religious community.

The Health Ministry on Friday reported more than 10,000 cases, including 92 deaths.

The virus causes mild to moderate symptoms in most patients, who recover within a few weeks. But it can cause severe illness or death, particularly in older patients or those with underlying health problems.

Israeli authorities moved quickly in mid-March to close borders, ground flights and shut down all non-essential businesses. But in the early days and weeks of the pandemic many in the ultra-Orthodox Jewish community ignored guidelines on social distancing, which health experts say is key to containing the outbreak.

In this Saturday Sept. 21, 2019 file photo, Shiite Houthi tribesmen hold their weapons as they chant slogans during a tribal gathering showing support for the Houthi movement, in Sanaa, Yemen. On Wednesday, April 8, 2020, the Saudi-led coalition fighting the Iranian-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen announced that its forces would begin a cease-fire starting at midnight, in what could pave the way for the first direct peace talks between the two sides that have been at war for more than five years. (AP Photo/Hani Mohammed)

In Oman on Friday, authorities ordered those living in the capital, Muscat, to remain there while banning people from traveling into the city over the virus. The country has more than 450 confirmed cases with two confirmed deaths.

There are more than 134,000 confirmed cases of the coronavirus in the

Middle East, including over 5,300 fatalities. Some 4,200 of those deaths are in Iran, which has the largest outbreak in the region. Authorities there had recorded over 68,000 total cases as of Friday.

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