

Saudi Arabia to end virus curfew next month

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Saudi Arabia said Tuesday it will end its nationwide coronavirus curfew from June 21, except in the holy city of Mecca, after more than two months of stringent curbs.

Prayers will also be allowed to resume in all mosques outside Mecca from May 31, the interior ministry said in a series of measures announced on state media.

Elsewhere in the Gulf, Kuwait and the emirate of Dubai also moved to ease their lockdown measures, which together with a collapse in oil prices have pushed the region into its worst economic crisis in decades.

Saudi Arabia, which has reported the highest number of coronavirus cases in the Gulf, imposed a full nationwide curfew during Eid al-Fitr, the Muslim holiday that marks the end of the fasting month of Ramadan.

The ministry said it will begin easing restrictions in a phased manner this week, with the curfew relaxed between 6 am and 3 pm between Thursday and Saturday.

From Sunday until June 20, the curfew will be further eased until 8 pm, the ministry added. The kingdom will lift the lockdown entirely from June 21.

"Starting from Thursday, the kingdom will enter a new phase (in dealing with the pandemic) and will gradually return to normal based on the rules of social distancing," Health Minister Tawfiq Al-Rabiah said on Monday.

Saudi Arabia has reported around 75,000 coronavirus infections and some 400 deaths from COVID-19.

In the United Arab Emirates, which has reported more than 30,000 cases and 248 deaths, authorities in Dubai moved to lift restrictions on businesses and shorten a nighttime curfew from Wednesday when the Eid holiday concludes.

Officials said late Monday that retail stores, gyms, cinemas and attractions like the dolphinarium will be allowed to reopen under social distancing and disinfection rules.

Kuwait, which has reported some 22,000 cases and 165 deaths, also said that it would end its total curfew this weekend, with reduced measures to be announced later.

Questions over the hajj

Saudi Arabia, home to Islam's holiest sites, in March suspended the year-round "umrah" pilgrimage over fears of the disease spreading in the holy cities of Mecca and Medina.

That suspension will remain in place, the interior ministry said.

Authorities are yet to announce whether they will proceed with this year's hajj—scheduled for late July—but they have urged Muslims to temporarily defer preparations for the annual pilgrimage.

Last year, some 2.5 million faithful travelled to

Saudi Arabia from around the world to participate in the hajj, which Muslims are obliged to perform at least once during their lifetime.

Mecca's Grand Mosque has been almost devoid of worshippers since March, with an eerie emptiness surrounding the sacred Kaaba—the large cube-shaped structure towards which Muslims around the world pray.

But on Sunday, the first day of Eid, prayers went ahead and an imam stood on a podium while Saudi security forces, some wearing masks, positioned themselves between rows of worshippers—their prayer mats placed in well-spaced arcs.

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