



The Fight Against COVID-19 in the Gaza Strip (Updated to June 21, 2020)

June 21, 2020

Overview

- ▶ **This past week no new cases of COVID-19 were reported in the Gaza Strip.** Eleven patients recovered and there are now **15 active cases** in the quarantine hospital at the Rafah Crossing. So far **Hamas has successfully prevented the virus from spreading internally in the Gaza Strip, as opposed to the renewed spread of the disease in the Palestinian Authority (PA) territories.**
- ▶ Despite the small number of cases, the head of the W.H.O. regional office in Gaza has reiterated his warning that **the internal spread of the virus is only a matter of time.** Sources in the public health system in Gaza have warned the public not to become complacent, and **have stated that the medical institutions must be prepared for mass infection.**
- ▶ The **lifting of restrictions continues**, accompanied by the implementation of preventive measures and warnings against public complacency.
- ▶ The heads of the public health system continue **complaining about the shortage of medical resources. They blame Israel and the PA** for the public health system's critical condition and accuse the PA of preventing the transfer of donations of money and medical equipment to the Gaza Strip.

The Extent of the Infection

On June 18, 2020, Dr. Ashraf al-Qidra, spokesman the ministry of health, reported the recovery of 11 COVID-19 patients. **The number of active cases now stands at 15** (26 last week). All the active cases are being treated in the quarantine hospital at the **Rafah Crossing** (al-Ra'i news agency, June 19, 2020; Ashraf al-Qidra's Twitter account, June 18, 2020). The total number of COVID-19 patients in the Gaza Strip since the outbreak of the disease **stands at 72.** Fifty-six have recovered, 38 of whom are still in the quarantine center at the Rafah Crossing, and 18 have been discharged to their homes. In addition, there was **one death** (website of the al-Ghad channel, June 20, 2020).

► As of June 20, 2020, the ministry of health in Gaza had carried out 12,057 tests, 11,985 of which were negative (al-Ra'i news agency, June 20 2020). There are 384 people isolated in seven quarantine centers spread throughout the Gaza Strip (website of the al-Ghad channel, June 20, 2020).

► Despite the relatively small number of cases, Abd al-Nasser Sabah, director of the regional W.H.O. office in Gaza, **again warned that the spread of the virus inside the Gaza Strip is only a matter of time** and that the threat is very real. He said the lack of infection within Gazan society is a positive sign, but the number of cases detected in the quarantine centers is greater than the overall average since the beginning of the pandemic (Dunia al-Watan, June 19, 2020).

Warnings against Complacency and the Continuation of Preventive Measures

► Sources in the public health system **warned against complacency and of a possible internal outbreak of the virus**. Abd al-Nasser Sabah, director of the W.H.O.'s regional office, praised the efforts and preventive measures taken by the ministry of health at the quarantine centers. He said that because of the population density in the Gaza Strip the virus will spread faster than it does in neighboring countries. For that reason the W.H.O. is making a great effort **to send the message to the Gazan public that preventive measures are a serious matter and not to be taken lightly**. He said if implemented properly, the preventive measures will slow the spread of the disease and it will be possible to control it. He said the arrival of delegations and other groups at the beginning of July will endanger the Gaza Strip, and that it cannot be turned into one large quarantine center for an unlimited period of time (Dunia al-Watan, June 19, 2020).

► Abd al-Nasser Sabah warned against complacency and disregarding the ministry of health's guidelines and preventive measures. He said people were not wearing masks and public places were being opened (Dunia al-Watan, June 19, 2020).



**The Gaza beach. No masks and almost no social distancing
(Safa Twitter account, June 19, 2020).**

► Similar warnings were heard from Fadhal Na'im, chairman of the doctors' union in Gaza. He said the situation was **under control because there was a small number of infections and they were all contained in the quarantine centers**. However, he added, **that did not mean the danger had passed, because the public health system was exhausted and could not cope with an outbreak of the disease, especially because the Gaza Strip was the most densely populated place on the planet**. The crowding in the Gaza Strip and the shortage of resources make it difficult to locate COVID-19 cases and prevent the spread of the disease (al-Quds, June 18, 2020).

Ongoing Medical Preparations for a Possible Outbreak Inside the Gaza Strip

► Dr. Abd al-Nasser Sabah said that test kits and laboratory equipment for analyzing the kits and providing results were available in Gaza,. He said the W.H.O. was doing everything it could to ensure Gaza had a sufficient number of test kits. He said if the need arose **they could test between five and six thousand people a day** (Dunia al-Watan, June 19, 2020).

► A delegation from the ministry of health paid a visit to the epidemiological hospital (the European Hospital in Khan Yunis, currently devoted to treating COVID-19 patients) to examine its preparedness for dealing with a mass outbreak. The hospital director complained of a shortage of medical equipment and the need to finish training the medical staff. They discussed ways to acquire beds and other necessary medical equipment the hospital lacked (website of the ministry of health in Gaza, June 18, 2020).

► **Two simulation drills were carried out in June** with teams from the Palestinian Red Crescent in order to enhance the hospital's ability to respond to an outbreak of the virus, part of preparing to manage a mass-casualty event. Participants were trained to identify and treat suspected and confirmed cases. The medical staff is being trained by the W.H.O. and the

French Médecins du monde in collaboration with the ministry of health in Gaza and the Palestinian Red Crescent (Facebook page of the W.H.O. regional office, June 16, 2020).



The Red Crescent simulation drill
(Facebook page of the W.H.O. regional office, June 16, 2020).

Lifting Restrictions

► Despite the lifting of restrictions, **the authorities are strictly enforcing the implementation of the preventive measures.** Colonel Jihad Hamada, head of the police department in the Gaza municipalities, said that a number of mosques were recently closed because **people who came to attend prayers did not follow the guidelines and take preventive measures** (Dunia al-Watan, June 20, 2020). He complained that once restrictions had been lifted young people held parties in the evening in the public squares and streets. He said the issue was being monitored by the police, who broke up parties where preventive measures were not taken. (Dunia al-Watan, June 20, 2020)



Signs of return to routine life: the weekly demonstration of the families of Palestinian terrorists imprisoned in Israel, held at the headquarters of the Red Cross in Gaza City, after a hiatus of more than two months (Twitter account of journalist Hassan Aslih, June 15, 2020).



Soccer games held again, but without the presence of fans
(alresala.net, June 19, 2020).

Effects on the Gaza Strip's Economy

Allowing the import of merchandise

► As part of lifting restrictions, the ministry of economy in Gaza has permitted the import of second-hand merchandise, with strict adherence to health guidelines and preventive measures:

- ◆ **Second-hand clothing may be imported under the following conditions:** the clothing has to remain in quarantine at the crossing for 48 hours; the company importing the clothing has to agree to the ministry of health's protocols before the clothing is sold; company employees have to wear protective clothing while unpacking and laundering the clothing (al-Ra'i news agency, June 18, 2020).
- ◆ **Second-hand solar water heaters and thermal panels may be imported under the following conditions:** the units have to remain in quarantine for 24 hours; the water tanks have to be disinfected externally with bleach and washed internally with soap and water (al-Ra'i news agency, June 18, 2020).
- ◆ **Second-hand electrical appliances can be imported under the following conditions:** refrigerators and washing machines have to remain in quarantine for 24 hours; the company importing them has to provide an employee who will disinfect them with bleach externally and wash them internally with soap and water (al-Ra'i news agency, June 18 2020).



Operatives of the national security forces disinfect gas and diesel fuel containers from Egypt that entered the Gaza Strip through the Rafah Crossing (Facebook page of the ministry of the interior in Gaza, June 17, 2020).

► According to **Colonel Jihad Hamada**, head of the police department of the Gaza Strip municipalities, decisions will shortly be made concerning opening the markets which have been closed since the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis (Dunia al-Watan, June 20 2020). **Zakariya al-Hour**, general manager of the ministry of tourism, said that in light of the encouraging situation, it had been decided to **gradually open tourist facilities** to compensate owners for the losses suffered by the internal tourism industry, which are estimated at \$11 million. He said that once the vacation and other sites reopened, many events were held which had been postponed. He said the events were held with precautionary measures in place to protect participants insofar as was possible (Nawa website, June 14, 2020).



An empty vacation rental complex in Gaza (Chalets.rent Facebook page, June 10, 2020).

Accusations against Israel and the Palestinian Authority (PA)

► The heads of the Gazan public health system **continue complaining about the lack of resources for treating COVID-19**. They blame Israel and the PA for the public health system's crisis and accuse the PA of preventing donations of money and medical equipment from being delivered to the Gaza Strip:

◆ **Abd al-Latif al-Haj**, head of the international cooperation department in the ministry of health, said the ministry's warehouses **have a shortage of 47% of various drugs, 28% of medical equipment and 52% of laboratory reagents**. He added that completing preparations for an outbreak of COVID-19 would necessitate **\$23 million**. He said the donation of money from Qatar had not been given to the ministry of health and of the donations from Kuwait and Saudi Arabia given to the PA, nothing had been shared with the Gaza Strip.

◆ **Dr. Ashraf al-Qidra**, spokesman for the ministry of health in Gaza, said that **they urgently needed \$59 million** for the fight against COVID-19, while so far they had received only \$1.7 million. He said the PA did not transfer the Gaza Strip's share of all the foreign aid it received, a sum of \$40 million. Dr. Rami al-Abadle, director of the fight against infectious diseases in the hospital department of the ministry of health, said the most urgent medical needs for fighting the coronavirus were ventilators, ICU beds and PPE. He added that they had long lists with estimations totally between \$18 and \$21 million, of what was necessary to equip the epidemiological hospital [in Khan Yunis] to enable it to treat more than 1,500 COVID-19 patients (Nawa website, June 18, 2020).

◆ **Fadhal Na'im, chairman of the doctors' union in Gaza**, presented a position paper at an international communications symposium held on June 13, 2020. The paper was entitled "Palestinian professional work between the coronavirus and the [so-called Israeli] occupation," and **assigned full responsibility to Israel for the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic in Gaza because of the [so-called] "siege" it has [allegedly] waged against the Gaza Strip for 13 years**. He claimed that because of the "situation" 50% of the doctors had left Gaza to look for work elsewhere (Shehab, June 17, 2020).