## COVID-19 surge in Lebanon hits new peak with 456 infections

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 BEIRUT: Lebanon Monday confirmed a record 456 new coronavirus cases and two further deaths, as caretaker Health Minister Hamad Hassan called for a new nationwide lockdown to stem the virus' transmission.

The vast majority of the 456 new cases were captured among the local population, with just 20 coming from people traveling into the country within the last 24 hours.

The latest figures bring the cumulative count of coronavirus infections in Lebanon to 9,337 since Feb. 21. A total of 105 people have died from the highly infectious disease.

Infections have spiked since the reopening of Lebanon's only international airport at 10 percent capacity at the start of July. Noncompliance with virus containment measures at the community level has also contributed to the spike.

The positivity rate in June among tests conducted on the local population was 0.82 percent. In July, it jumped to 2.14 percent, but two weeks into August it now stands at 4.85 percent. The positivity rate among inbound travelers has stayed relatively stable since the airport reopened.

Hasan Monday called for a two-week lockdown, noting the spike in local infections.

He explained in a radio interview with Voice of Lebanon that the upcoming lockdown would be carried out in three parts: the airport, the city of Beirut, and other areas

"The increase in numbers was justified when we opened up the country in the beginning of July," Hasan said, adding that the Aug. 4 blast at Beirut Port that damaged half of the capital greatly affected the numbers that are beginning to appear now.

Public health consultant Sara Chang told The Daily Star that the sharp rise in cases was "startling, but not surprising given the fact there are little to no interventions in place to slow the spread."

She added that the government's strategy to deal with the spiralling crisis, whether due to the strategy itself or poor communication around it, was "unclear."

Hasan's call for the renewed closure of the country came as a Health Ministry spokesperson told The Daily Star that all of the coronavirus wards in the 14 governmental hospitals across Lebanon had reached capacity.

He added that the ministry was conducting an assessment of which governmental hospitals could have all of their other wards converted to COVID-19 centers. Private hospitals still have beds available for coronavirus patients.

Lebanon's already fragile health system took a heavy blow in the port explosion, which seriously damaged four hospitals in Beirut.

The head of the Beirut Doctors Syndicate Sharaf Abu Sharaf said Sunday that each of the four hosptials required "at least $10 million for restoration."

The Health Ministry spokesperson said that around 50 of the 1,527 COVID-19 beds were lost in the blast, in addition to at least 450 beds used for treating other illnesses. None of the country's 428 ventilators were damaged.

"If the cases continue at this pace, the capacity of hospitals will be completely depleted," Fadi El-Jardali, public health professor at the American University of Beirut, told The Daily Star.

"It's much more urgent than ever that there is a complete lockdown for at least two weeks to delay the transmission and flatten the curve in terms of hospital capacity," he said.

"My worry is at the airport. If we don't have stricter measures to follow up on the travelers and make sure they are complying with self-isolation, we can expect more of a trial and error approach with lockdown."

Jardali added that stricter isolation measures would ideally follow the Jordan model, which saw travel between cities and governorates tightly restricted, and 24 hour curfews periodically enacted.

He and Chang both cast doubt, however, on the government's ability to impose such measures given the multiple, overlapping crises affecting the country – particularly following the resignation of Prime Minister Hassan Diab's government last week.

"A lockdown seems unrealistic and unreasonable given the economic and political situation, and the effectiveness and interest [at the community level] in pursuing other interventions like physical distancing, moderate closures, travel restrictions seems negligible," Chang said.

Jardali added that the government's resignaton in the wake of the port blast added to the complexity of trying to contain the virus, which needs strong coordination between different governmental sectors.

"Certain officials and ministries may not be taking this as seriously as they should be and making sure that they have the appropriate coordination," he warned.

The number of health care workers infected with COVID-19 has also risen sharply in recent weeks, with several hundred now confirmed to have contracted the disease.

"Almost all of the [infected] nurses were not working directly with COVID-19 patients," the head of the Order of Nurses Dr. Myrna Doumit said.

"They have full PPE on Covid wards but it's the people in other wards like ER that are being affected."

She explained that the accelerating rate of local transmission was also responsible for health workers being infected, since they live within local communities.

Around 30 percent of COVID-19 cases in Lebanon do not have a well-defined source of infection, according to the World Health Organization.

Given this threat, Doumit called on the Lebanese to take the issue more seriously, despite the pain of simultaneously going through a biting economic collapse and reeling from the Beirut Port blast.

"People will die on the streets [if hospitals reach capacity]. Then they'll start believing that COVID-19 is real," she said.