

A look back at Lebanon's battle with COVID-19 one year on

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BEIRUT: Exactly one year ago on Feb. 21, the first case of COVID-19 was detected in Lebanon after the arrival of a woman on a flight travelling from Iran. At the time, the country was unaware how much life would be turned upside down by the coronavirus, a new highly contagious respiratory illness.

After an initial steady growth in the number of infections through the first half of 2020, it felt as if Lebanon may be favored from the true impact of the disease, as leaders made a quick decision to impose drastic measures that managed to contain the virus early on, with daily cases lingering in double figures for months, while other countries health sectors battled with outbreaks and thousands of infections.

But Lebanon did not escape the grim and deadly effects of the disease as the worst was yet to come.

Over the last few months, the country has witnessed thousands of deaths and a rapid rise in infections as an alarming surge swept the country through the winter, overwhelming hospitals causing full ICU wards and the sick being turned away.

Although, despite weary citizens feeling the impact of the fifth nationwide lockdown since the pandemic began, there is some respite in sight with the start of the coronavirus vaccination program last week. All who reside in Lebanon are invited to receive the immunizing jab for free, with priority given to health care workers, those aged over 75 or with existing comorbidities. The Health Ministry has said it plans to vaccinate 80 percent of the population by the end of the year or start of 2022 to achieve herd immunity levels.

For Lebanon, the pandemic arrived at a time of great instability, only five months after the popular uprising of Oct. 17, that saw the resigning of Saad Hariri's government and the subsequent introduction of Hasan Diab as prime minister. In addition, the economic crisis was already damaging the value of the lira and causing jobs to be lost and business to shut.

Only 26 days after the first identified infection and confirmed cases under 100, Diab imposed a state of "general mobilization" on March 15 across Lebanon, shutting air, land and sea ports in an unprecedented move, which remained closed until July. Citizens raced to pharmacies to stock up on face masks, sanitizers and antiseptics before all venues, shops and educational institutions were shut down and the population was ordered to stay at home as life came to a grinding halt.

The country's already tired hospitals, bulging with debt from money owed by the government were initially given respite from the strength of the disease as cases remained low until July.

But the impact of the virus coupled with financial troubles led the American University of Beirut Medical Center to lay off over 500 staff members in July, while the union for government hospital workers urged the government to pay its dues. In addition, there was increasing pressure to expand ICU wards in hospitals, but staff shortages added to difficulties. Firass Abiad, head of Rafik Hariri University Hospital became a spokesperson for the country's battle with the virus, updating the public with latest science and the evolving effects of the virus in Lebanon and worldwide.

In July, the first physician in Lebanon died after contracting the virus, 32-year-old Louay Ismael who worked at the Italian Hospital in Tyre. A further 12 doctors are killed from the virus.

By early summer life itched back to normal; restaurants and bars reopened with social distancing measures introduced; operating at half capacity and taking the temperature of patrons on entry. Wearing face masks became commonplace in offices and shops, and it was mandatory to wear one in public with fines of up to LL50,000 for those not complying.

After the airport reopened incoming travelers were tested for coronavirus and had to quarantine at home or in a hotel, which was intermittently imposed throughout the year with criticism to its effectiveness. Positive cases from incoming travelers were contained, despite some public opinion believing it to be the source of infections.

As lockdowns further destabilized the country's perilous economic situation, citizens staged protests against the measures which have caused many to lose income and sank the vulnerable further into poverty. By February 2021 residents in Tripoli staged weeklong riots, as discontent boiled over resulting in violent clashes with the security forces. The virus regulations have hit those who rely on daily wages the hardest, and the government has failed to offer much financial support.

With the impact of the devastating blast in August, virus safety regulations went disregarded as Beirut was declared an emergency city and hospitals in the city suffer damage.

Daily cases jumped into the thousands as the end of the year approached and citizens enjoyed open restaurants, cafes, malls and other public venues.

From October onward the country witnessed spiraling infections; a record of 1,904 new cases was reported on the eve of the two-week November lockdown when citizens were ordered inside from 5 a.m.-5 p.m., adding to a total number of 102,607 infected people. Previous localized lockdowns across the country failed; partly from wavering compliance and from little to no police interference, resulting in reports of locals attending large weddings and life continuing as normal.

As the December holiday season approached and virus deaths totaled 1,000 people, the government decided to relax rules, loosening the curfew to 3 a.m.-5 a.m. and allowing the reopening of night time venues like bars and clubs, some of whom welcomed patrons for the first time since March.

At the same time, health experts raised the alarm over genetic mutations in the virus appearing around the world including in Brazil, South Africa and the UK. Lebanon detected the UK variant on Dec. 25, which scientists declared more contagious.

Entering 2021, reports from hospitals painted a grim picture of oxygen tank shortages and full wards. Daily cases made regular records, reporting over 3,000 and 4,000 cases at times. The new year recorded the highest number of deaths so far, with nearly 3,000 people dying this year alone.

So far, COVID-19 has infected around 111 million people globally, with 353,371 in Lebanon, while it took the lives of 2.45 million of those, 4,297 were residents of Lebanon.