News



People visit the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, West Bank, Thursday, March 5, 2020. Palestinian authorities said the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, built atop the spot where Christians believe Jesus was born, will close indefinitely due to coronavirus concerns. (AP/Mahmoud Illean)

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Bethlehem, West Bank — March 6, 2020

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Palestinian officials on March 5 closed the storied Church of the Nativity in the biblical city of Bethlehem indefinitely over fears of the new coronavirus, weeks ahead of the busy Easter holiday season.

The announcement by the Palestinian tourism ministry threatened to devastate the vital tourism industry in the town where Jesus is believed to have been born. The spread of the virus across the Middle East has already disrupted worship at other major holy sites.

Iran, the epicenter of the virus in the region, announced that it would set up checkpoints to limit travel between major cities and urged citizens to reduce their use of paper money to help slow the outbreak, which has killed at least 107 people in the country.

Iranian state TV also reported that Hossein Sheikholeslam, a 68-year-old diplomat who was an adviser to Iran's foreign minister, died of the coronavirus.

In addition, Iran's state-run media said that Mohammad Sadr, a member of the country's Expediency Council and a senior adviser to the foreign minister, has been infected. Another member of the council, which advises Iran's supreme leader, died earlier this week after falling ill with the new virus, which has sickened a number of Iranian officials.

The Church of the Nativity was closed after suspicions that four Palestinians had caught the virus, prompting a flurry of measures that included banning all tourists from the Israeli-occupied West Bank for an unspecified amount of time and shutting down other places of worship in Bethlehem for two weeks.

The Palestinian health ministry later said a total of seven Palestinians from Bethlehem have tested positive for the virus, the first cases reported in the Palestinian territories.

It said the seven worked at a hotel where a group of Greek tourists stayed during a tour of Israel and the Palestinian territories in late February. The tourists tested positive for the virus after returning to Greece.

Built on the site where Christians believe Jesus was born in a manger, the Church of the Nativity is one of several tourist and holy sites to shut their doors over concerns about the virus, which has infected tens of thousands of people and killed more than 3,000 globally.

Just before 4 p.m., a bearded clergyman walked outside and locked the church's wooden door with a large key. A team of workers dressed in white overalls arrived with jugs of cleaning materials and walked through a side entrance to disinfect the building. Tariq al-Ali, one of the workers, said it was the second time his team disinfected the church.

"We have disinfected many institutions in the past week. We are under pressure," he said.

Saif Saboh, a Palestinian tour guide, said a number of groups had canceled visits in recent days. He said he has stopped shaking hands or getting too close to tourists. "I'm terrified," he said. "Any tourist could be infected."

The virus has disrupted Muslim worship across the Middle East. Saudi Arabia banned pilgrimages to the holy city of Mecca, while Iran has canceled Friday's Islamic prayers in major cities. Iraq canceled Friday prayers in Karbala, where a weekly sermon is delivered on behalf of the country's top Shiite cleric.

The Church of the Nativity receives some 10,000 tourists a day, according to Palestinian officials, and is expected to welcome tens of thousands of visitors during the Easter season.



Workers sterilize the ground in front of the Kaaba, the cubic building at the Grand Mosque, in the Muslim holy city of Mecca, Saudi Arabia, March 5, 2020. Saudi Arabia's Deputy Health Minister Abdel-Fattah Mashat was quoted on the state-linked news site Al-Yaum saying that groups of visitors to Mecca from inside the country would now also be barred from performing the pilgrimage, known as the umrah. (AP/Amr Nabil)

Elias al-Arja, the head of the Bethlehem hotel owners union, angrily accused authorities of caving in to panic. "This will cause huge damage to the economy. We have 3,000 workers in the tourist sector and they will all go home. Who is going to feed their families?" he said.

Anton Suleiman, the mayor of Bethlehem, acknowledged the economic impact, but said "public safety is the most important thing to us."

In Iran, Health Minister Saeed Namaki announced his country's latest restrictions, saying schools and universities will remain closed through Nowruz, the Persian New Year, on March 20. "We will strictly control comings and goings," he said.

More than 3,740 cases have been confirmed across the Middle East. Iran and Italy have the world's highest death tolls outside of China.

The U.S. official focused on Iran, Brian Hook, said Thursday the U.S. offered humanitarian assistance to Iran to help them deal with the outbreak, but "the regime rejected the offer."

Hook, speaking at a news conference in Paris, also said the U.S. has asked Iran to release American detainees "on medical furlough" over fears the coronavirus may be infesting the country's prisons.

Israeli officials said they were working closely with their Palestinian counterparts to contain the virus. COGAT, the Israeli defense body responsible for Palestinian civilian matters, said it had delivered 250 test kits to the Palestinians and was coordinating joint training sessions for Israeli and Palestinian medical workers.

For the time being, other major places of worship in the Holy Land remained open. Israeli officials said there were no special precautions at the Western Wall, the holiest site where Jews can pray, though hand sanitizing stations were placed at the site.

"In this time of distress, there is nothing more appropriate than coming to pray at the Western Wall," said Shmuel Rabinowitz, the rabbi who oversees the site.

The nearby Al Aqsa mosque compound was expected to welcome 50,000 worshipers for Friday prayers. The Islamic Waqf, which administers the site, said the buildings have been disinfected and the sermon would be brief.

Israel, which has 17 confirmed virus cases, has taken strict measures in a bid to stave off an outbreak, including banning the entry of visitors from around 10

countries.

On March 5, German airline Lufthansa said it and its Austrian and Swiss subsidiaries were canceling flights to and from Israel for three weeks starting Sunday because of the restrictions.

Israeli airline El Al, which has canceled dozens of flights to countries with outbreaks, announced Wednesday that it was laying off 1,000 employees.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said the government will set up an "emergency cash flow assistance fund" for businesses deemed essential to the economy. It was not immediately clear if that would apply to El Al.

Earlier on Thursday, the United Arab Emirates warned citizens and foreign residents not to travel abroad, The country is home to two major long-haul airlines, Emirates and Etihad, which have encouraged staff to take time off as foreign travel has dropped due to the virus.

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