

CCSD COVID-19 9th Report for Syria June 30, 2020

Syrians across the country under multiple control areas face the danger of the COVID-19 virus. In June 2020, while many cases remain underreported, there has been an increase in positive COVID-19 cases reported. Civil Society organizations provide services in their operating areas, and provide medicine and basic food items, as well as the continuation of activities on social cohesion, public health awareness, and support for groups affected by the virus.

This is the ninth report in a series of reports that the Center for Civil Society and Democracy (CCSD) has published since the outbreak began in March, 2020. This report monitors the general situation in Syria in all areas of control during the period between June 3 – 30, 2020.

Syrian Regime Control areas

The Syrian Regime's control areas witnessed a noticeable increase in the number of registered cases. The Ministry of Health announced on June 30, 2020 that the number of people infected has reached up to 279 COVID-19 cases, with 105 people who have recovered. Up to date, nine people have died from COVID-19. The Syrian Ministry of Health reported that most of the new infections have been caused from mixing among those who have already been infected and not taking the necessary precautions.

One hundred and twenty-three students who arrived from Lebanon to take academic examinations that began on June 21, 2020 in Syria were put under quarantine after an infected case was reported among the students. The Ministry of Health indicated that students would still be able to conduct their exams under quarantine in Jdaidet Yabous within the appropriate health requirements and guidelines that prevent them from being vulnerable from COVID-19.

The Syrian government has quarantined areas where the virus was noted to spread which included Ras al-Maarah and Jadid al-Fadl and a number of buildings in the suburbs of Qudsaya in the Damascus countryside. Exams for certified basic education were postponed and secondary school exams for new students were designated in various centers to organize social distancing appropriately.

The Aleppo Governorate issued a decision to close the Saadallah Al-Jabri Square, the vicinity of the Aleppo Citadel, the Corniche Izaa, and a number of public squares, as part of measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

It is worth noting that Syria is carrying out two countrywide COVID-19 exams; the first which costs 18 thousand Syrian pounds, which is a 10-minute rapid clinical test, and is 30% less accurate than the PCR examinations. The PCR examination is a test that is conducted for those returning from travel or suspected of being infected of COVID-19 inside Syria. Those wishing to travel through the airport to leave Syria, especially from the Lebanon Airport, a PCR

examination is required and costs \$100 USD (cost is according to the central bank's exchange rate). Prices are high and many Syrians are unable to pay these costs, which limits Syrians to be able to go to health centers. Both test prices are high and burdensome for Syrians to pay, especially with the Syrian pound steadily devaluating. The current average salary for Syrians is around 40,000 Syrian pounds.

On June 8, 2020, the Council of Ministers issued a decision to resume work at a 30% capacity and to approve new regulations for the establishment of weddings to be in open places with an occupancy rate of 50%. The Ministry of Education issued a decision to allow summer educational courses to be held in institutes, language laboratories, vocational centers and private schools where there would be more space.

The implementation of Resolution No. 324 issued on May 5, 2020 stops the export of the following materials: dairy, cheese, canned legumes, chlorine, and javil water, for an additional month.

The economic situation in the areas controlled by the Syrian Regime

Many small businesses and shops are closed because of bankruptcy, their inability to deal with the dollar price difference, or their inability to pay employee rent and salary. The government delivered an unemployment allowance in Damascus and its countryside to 1,167 people in one payment, and the amount totaling to 100 thousand Syrian pounds.

The House of Representatives held a session to discuss the economic situation and the drug crisis in light of the significant rise of the exchange rate of the dollar against the Syrian pound, which was accompanied by a large rise in commodity prices, as the dollar reached a threshold of 3000 Syrian pounds. The Central Bank of Syria raised the official exchange rate for one dollar from 700 to 1250 Syrian pounds. There was also a pursuit of limiting money changers and recipients receiving an excess of \$500 USD. The Syrian Regime has also prevented citizens from transferring any amount exceeding 5 million Syrian pounds between the governorates in the form of cash and has imposed its transfer via bank transfers with high fees that differ from bank to bank.

The Damascus Chamber of Commerce launched an initiative to reduce the prices of basic materials, after a meeting of Damascus merchants with the Minister of Commerce Talal Al-Barazi in the Damascus Chamber of Commerce.

The increase of domestic violence was reported, and may have a direct relationship with the dire economic situation and the loss of jobs and businesses.

Mohsin, a retired employee who gets 60 thousand Syrian pounds, which is equivalent to \$20 USD, is not enough for food for him, his wife and two children:

My little son is studying at university and is in need of expenses for school. I have many bills and payments also for the home. Because of Corona, most of our income sources are absent, so the situation has become catastrophic in my family. This has led to a lot of shouting and excess nervousness. This has caused problems at the family level."

There are significant concerns of increased COVID-19 cases for medical personnel in hospitals and medical centers due to a lack of preventive procedures and equipment in the hospitals. There is also an absence of access to departments for those suspected of being infected with the COVID-19.

There has also been an increase of theft that has been recorded which has a direct correlation to the deteriorating economic condition. Cases of theft were recorded in Latakia, Homs, Damascus, the Damascus countryside, and some of Hama countryside. Theft mainly affected pharmacies, food stores, gold stores, and people's cars.

Northwest Syria

There were zero COVID-19 cases recorded in the month of June, and the number of tested samples up to June 30, 2020, reached 1,636. Precautionary and strict measures are being taken in most medical centers and organizations working in the field.

Mariam, one of the facilitators at the Child and Mother Center in Atma camps, said:

“There is a difficulty in adhering to the prevention measures despite the importance, because many women do not believe that there is a virus. We were criticized if we sterilized and sanitized our hands after saluting or shaking hands with people in our own department. One of the women accused us of being arrogant and that it is rude to wash and sanitize the hand of the facilitator after shaking hands. This is even after we have had multiple awareness sessions on COVID-19 and practiced preventative measures in our center. Unfortunately, some women still haven't started practicing these tools to protect themselves.”

Schools have opened and received students without any precautionary measures for COVID-19 and many markets and public places witness gathering of people and even at medical centers people no longer abide by the social distancing procedures.

Khadija, one of the IDPs from the Al-Tamanna region from the northern Hama countryside said:

“I went to book a room to make an appointment for my child. The registration list was on the window instead of speaking to someone so that we could social distance from each other because of COVID-19. However, many women (10) gathered by the window and competed to register because we thought that if you entered your information early you would be able to secure a spot and be protected from the sun's heat. If we did not register for a room we may be asked to sit outside in the isolation tent and be hot. When they did not send us to the isolation tent to sanitize, the women believed that there was no virus, but this was because there was miscommunication and mishandling from the local medical authorities with the patients and clients.”

“At the Al-Ikhaa Hospital the waiting rooms are overcrowded and many people do not wear masks, even those with colds and other illnesses. How can a displaced person, who is one of the most vulnerable to be protected when we also struggle to purchase masks for ourselves and our children? We stand helpless when someone tells us that we do not even have enough money to pay for bread and to wear a mask. Instead I cover my mouth with the ends of my dress, and this is easier for me.”

At the Deir Ballut crossing, the local authorities follow prevention measures by taking the temperature of people transferring and asking them questions like if they suffer from any symptoms of coughing or feeling warm with a fever. Although the local officials ask these questions, it's not enough. Vehicles transporting workers from and to agricultural lands carry approximately 25 people in its box. All are vulnerable to the COVID-19 infection, especially if they are not wearing masks or socially distancing.

North-eastern Syria

No COVID-19 infections have been recorded in the region, which resulted in a lifting of restrictions across North-eastern Syria.

In Al-Hasakah Governorate:

The Self-Administration allowed kindergartens to open, and issued a decision to lift the partial ban on northeastern Syria on 15 June 2020, with the crossings remaining closed, except for Tabqa and Al-Tayha crossings for humanitarian cases and students. The administration of the Semalka crossing, it was decided to close the crossing after applying the curfew in the Kurdistan region of Iraq on June 6, 2020 as a preventive measure, after a high number of cases in the region were reported. On the following Sunday and Wednesday, people were allowed to return from North-eastern Syria to the Kurdistan region of Iraq. The medical team at the crossing reported back that the results of the tests from the returnees of the region came out negative.

In Al-Raqqa Governorate:

The Health Committee began setting up a private laboratory to check the status of the COVID-19 virus inside the city of Al-Raqqa, and the Al-Salhabiyah west clinic was opened. The recruitment of 50 doctors, nurses and administrative staff for the city's quarantine center began. The Health Department of Al-Raqqa continued to spray and sterilize all operations areas established by the workshops of the Health Department. It was monitored that all internal transport lines would return to work after the Self-Administration eased the ban procedures. Additionally, fishing, trading and marketing were permitted for a month after the end of the three-month ban.

The Technical Services Department in Al-Raqqa resumed work and the removal of debris and the opening of roads in several downtown districts began. The hygiene department completed the cleaning and removal of dust from the road between the Panorama Circle and the Al-Jazeera Junction. The Sports and Youth Committee also resumed all sporting activities

in Raqqa and its countryside after more than two months. The exchange rate of the dollar in the Al-Raqqa governorate has reached up to 3,000 SYP per US dollar.

In Deir Al-Zour Governorate:

People generally lead a normal life without taking preventive measures against the COVID-19 virus. It is worth noting that no positive cases have been recorded in Deir Al-Zour Governorate. The Health Committee of the Deir Al-Zour Civil Council, in cooperation and coordination with the World Health Organization, delivered medical equipment and devices to support and equip Deir Al-Zour hospitals and medical centers.

The municipal council of Deir Ezzor has resumed training courses for its employees, which were eventually suspended as a result of precautionary measures to combat COVID-19. The course aims to increase the experience of employees in all areas of institutional work, taking into account all preventive health measures.

The economic situation is poor. Mills have been stopped from selling flour which is controlled by the Self-Administration. The high prices of wheat have led to a bread crisis in the Western countryside of Deir Al-Zour. A bundle of bread has reached to 500 Syrian pounds. The Tourist bakery which serves the eastern countryside has also been closed. Because of these issues, it has led to a series of protests against deteriorating living conditions, high prices of basic materials and food, and administrative corruption. Protesters have burned tires in Briha village, east of Deir Ezzor, and a demonstration cut off the main road in the town of Sabha in the Eastern countryside. There were also demonstrations in the town of Sour, and at the Grain Center by farmers because of the newly raised price of wheat that was decided by the Self-Administration.

Several fires have erupted, including a fire in the village of Al-Milaj (30 acres), Jadida Bakara in the eastern countryside (10 acres), Abu Hamam (15 acres) which destroyed a wheat crop and Abu Khashab in the Western countryside of Dier Al-Zour.