

Week Ending 15 August 2020

Coronavirus Cases

| | Overall | New This Week |
|--------------------|------------|---------------|
| Total Cases | 182 | 80 |
| Deaths | 10 | 5 |
| Recoveries | 17 | 10 |

Cases by Region

Jazira region: 132
Euphrates region: 5

Deir-ez-Zor region: 8
Shebha pocket: 30

Unknown: 4

Key Developments

- Coronavirus cases in North and East Syria (NES) rising rapidly following new outbreak at end of July
- At least 15 confirmed cases among health workers in Heseke, key epicenter of disease
- 3 confirmed cases among health workers in Hol camp, disease yet to spread among camp residents
- NES residents suffering from economic crisis and unable to follow coronavirus restrictions, with only 19% staying home and 7% wearing facemasks, UN research finds
- NGOs in Shebha raise alarm about outbreak in isolated, IDP-populated region under Syrian government embargo

In Depth

New outbreak: epicenters in Heseke and among health workers

Despite having experienced a limited number of corona cases (5 cases and 1 death) up to the beginning of July, the situation remained stable until the very end of July and beginning of August when the numbers quickly spiked, going from 11 on 29 July to 28 on the 30 July, and reaching 78 confirmed cases a week later on 6 August. Since then the numbers of cases has been rising exponentially.

A high-risk group in NES are the health workers, who also play a key role in transmitting the disease. As of 9 August, at least 15 of the confirmed cases were health workers, particularly in the Heseke Military Hospital which is a key epicenter, with the majority of confirmed cases of health workers being in this hospital, plus Heseke National hospital. Health services have been reduced or shut down, and movement of health staff has been limited, creating knock-on effects for health service delivery.

Health workers and local officials blame the Syrian Government for the spread in NES, accusing them of failing to control the passage of thousands of people from their territory into NES, and even deliberately using this transit as a weapon to put pressure on NES. In particular, flights from coronavirus epicenter Damascus (where there are an estimated 100,000, largely unreported cases) to Qamishlo Airport (which remains in Syrian Government control) are not being subjected to any checks. In the Shuheil area of Deir-ez-Zor alone, there are at least 15 informal crossing points and around 1500 people crossing back and forth daily from Syrian Government-controlled areas without any screening process.

Lockdown is again in place in NES, mostly strictly in the Jazira region. The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) has banned public gatherings, closed schools and non-essential stores and facilities, and restricted non-essential travel between cities.

The AANES continues to deal with a shortage of coronavirus test kits for their PCR machines, and is struggling to trace and contain the outbreak. Over 50% of the less than 200 tests conducted by the AANES itself since the start of the outbreak have come back positive (as of 9 August), indicating that the disease is much more widely spread than official figures indicate.

Situation in Hol Camp

On 1 August, three cases of coronavirus were documented among health workers in Hol Camp. The affected facilities have been closed and disinfected, with the three health workers put into quarantine until recovery, and contrary to some reports there have been no documented cases among camp residents. IDP camps including Hol are not accepting new arrivals to prevent the spread of the virus, while all non-essential services have been suspended.

Separately, eight children in Hol camp died in the space of a week due to non-corona-related malnutrition and dehydration, underscoring that the disease's spread in Hol would prove disastrous. Underlying health problems and cramped conditions are compounded by a hostile environment for health workers and many residents' refusal to accept assistance, relying instead on traditional, Islamic medicine.

Outbreak in Shebha pocket

The Human Rights Organization and Kurdish Red Crescent of Shebha released an SOS statement on 9 August, appealing to the UN plus health, human rights and humanitarian organizations including



UNICEF, WHO and International Red Crescent to play their role and provide much-needed support to the IDPs residing in Shebha's camps and ad-hoc settlements.

The statement notes that the 200,000 Kurdish IDPs in Shebha, displaced during Turkey's 2018 invasion and subsequent campaign of forcible demographic change are at high risk of coronavirus. These IDPs are living in cramped conditions, and desperately lacking resources due to a strict embargo enforced by the Syrian government on the isolated region. The region is served by one ad-hoc hospital in a converted residential home, and Syrian government checkpoints obstruct both medicine arriving into the region, and patients being transferred to Aleppo hospital in the region's sole ambulance. The last confirmed number of cases recorded for Shebha was 30 but due to the harsh conditions medical workers in Shebha greatly fear the fast spreading of the disease.

Locals unable to follow coronavirus restrictions, UN research finds

New research published by the UN's HRAP agency has found that civilians in NES have the highest level of trust in their region's coronavirus response (71%, opposed to 68% in Syrian govt areas and just 43% in HTS/Turkish-occupied areas.) Meanwhile, less than 0.4% of population in NES trust Syrian government on coronavirus. However, over 98% of people in NES say their ability to meet basic needs has deteriorated due to economic crisis and coronavirus.

Adherence to all coronavirus preventative measures continues to fall even as coronavirus cases rise, with 19% of people staying home across Syria (down from 53% in May) and only 25% practicing social distancing (down from 36%). Only 7% of people in NES wearing facemasks, as "community members often cannot find masks in stores or afford them where they are available."