

Week Ending 21 AUGUST 2020

Coronavirus Cases

	Overall	New This Week
Total Cases	327	145
Deaths	17	7
Recoveries	51	30

Cases by Region

Jazira region: 129 Deir-ez-Zor region: 4
Euphrates region: 6 Shehba pocket: 6

Key Developments

- Turkey shuts off water, leaving key coronavirus facilities, Hol Camp, c. one million civilians struggling to follow basic hygiene measures
- New cases in NES this week reach 145, an 81% increase, while deaths increase 40% (5,7) and recoveries triple (10, 30)
- Majority of new cases in the Jazirah region (89%), followed by Euphrates and Shehba which both recorded 4% of new cases, plus 3% in Deir-ez-Zor
- New coronavirus restrictions inconsistently followed, large funeral held for coronavirus victim in Raqqa
- Difficulties in containing coronavirus cases continue, contact tracing cancelled in Jazira due to uncontrollable spread

In Depth

New coronavirus restrictions inconsistently followed

According to a statement released by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), anyone leaving home not wearing a mask will be fined 1,000 SYP (\$0.50). Curfew has been extended for another week, until 27 August, while mechanic stores are allowed to re-open and money exchange stores are allowed limited opening hours. Store owners and workers are now required to wear mask and gloves at all times, and to not have large numbers gather in the store at one time. Stores who do not comply with these new rules will be closed.

These rulings are being inconsistently followed, with best adherence and enforcement in the Jazira region. Nonetheless, due to the poor economic conditions many stores are flouting the rules, and markets remain relatively busy.

The laws are being poorly applied if at all in the Euphrates and Deir-ez-Zor regions, with Raqqa even seeing a large funeral held for a coronavirus victim.

Turkish water shut-off leaves civilians struggling to follow hygiene measures

Turkey has cut off waterflow from Allouk station for the tenth time since bombing and seizing Allouk in October 2019, leaving up to a million people in coronavirus hot-spot Heseke without access to drinking water and unable to carry out basic hygiene measures. Allouk is a critical piece of infrastructure, providing drinking water to at least 650,000 people in the cities of Hasekah, Til Temir, Sheddadi and Hol, among others; 65,000 IDPs and ISIS-linked individuals in Hol Camp; IDPs in Washokani and Aresha camps, including those displaced by the Turkish invasion; the largest detention facility for ISIS fighters in the world, housing some 5000 fighters and the scene of a recent uprising; and NES' main coronavirus quarantine hospital.

This region is the site of NES' largest coronavirus outbreak. AANES and NGOs are scrambling to organise water distributions in Heseke, and struggling also to help locals take basic hygiene precautions. AANES is trialling a new water pumping station in Hema village, near Heseke, but even when online this station will only meet 30% of need, delivering water to Heseke once every ten days. WHO's head of mission in Syria this week urged Turkey to stop using water-flow to civilians as a weapon of war.

Spread among health workers

One in four coronavirus cases in North and East Syria are currently among health-workers. Five out of six cases in Kobane are health-workers, including members of the coronavirus response team in that city, along with clusters among health workers in three major medical facilities in Heseke.

This spread is driven by extensive movement of healthworkers, lack of PPE, inadequate screening and a general sense of complacency about coronavirus. In Hol camp, as reported last week, three Kurdish Red Crescent employees have also tested positive, though 24 camp residents displaying potential symptoms or tested as part of follow-up checks have all tested negative. Nonetheless, major concerns remain about a lethal spread into Hol Camp and other camps and detention facilities.

Difficulties in tracing and containing coronavirus

With approximately 40% of tests currently returning a positive result, coronavirus is believed to be much more widely spread in North and East Syria than the figures suggest. In the Jazira region, contact tracing has been entirely suspended, as the virus' spread is now out of control and it is impossible for health authorities to adequately trace it. A backlog in the main testing facility in Qamishlo means it is taking several days to deliver PCR test results.

There are particular concerns around undetected spread in Kobane and Raqqa, key urban centers which are currently experiencing under-testing, limited lockdown adherence and transmission through healthworkers at key facilities. It is also difficult to control movement in Deir-ez-Zor, where thousands of people continue to move across unofficial border crossings with the Syrian government and there are no properly-equipped facilities for dealing with coronavirus.

In Raqqa and Aleppo, thousands of students continue to cross between NES and Syrian Government regions on a daily basis.

Though people are dying, none of the region's 40 ICU beds have yet been put into use, with most cases people dying before they reach hospital. Health workers report difficulties in convincing families to allow their members to be hospitalized, or to go into quarantine, with some individuals running away rather than entering quarantine. Moreover, a medical source tells RIC they fear the ICU wards are still not fit for purpose, and are unlikely to be able to help anyone who enters a critical state.

Statement from Robin Fleming

"AANES is facing severe difficulties in tracing and containing the virus, with local populations struggling to follow basic coronavirus measures due to the ongoing economic crisis, lack of infrastructure, and general fatigue. The outbreak in key urban centers in the Jazira region is already spreading too fast to be traced or contained.

These challenges are worsened by Turkey's severing of the waterflow feeding key coronavirus epicenter Heseke, plus Hol camp and the region's largest coronavirus isolation hospital. Denying civilians access to drinking water is a war-crime whatever the circumstances: in the context of the coronavirus outbreak, Turkey's manipulation of the waterflow will prove deadly."