

International

For worshippers, shrine visits go virtual in virus-hit Iraq

Iraq reported over 3,000 infections, more than 110 deaths

NAJAF: Every year, Maher al-Rubaye would marvel at the gold-leaf walls of Iraq's Imam Ali mausoleum. He still visits the shrine today—through a screen from his living room.

The spread of the new coronavirus in Iraq has prompted the closure of major mosques to visitors, including the ornate burial place of Ali, the fourth Islamic caliph and relative of the Prophet Mohammed (PBUH), in the shrine city Najaf. Just a few hundred meters from the mausoleum, Rubaye—at home because of lockdown measures—extends one hand towards the sky in prayer and holds his mobile phone with the other.

On the screen flash images of the shrine: its large plaza, the marble floors and intricate calligraphy—and finally, the glittering mausoleum itself. “I visit you, Commander of the Faithful,” Rubaye recites, adding a COVID-19-mandated amendment: “...from a distance.” Iraq has reported over 3,000 coronavirus infections and more than 110 deaths since its first case was recorded nearly three months ago in Najaf. Authorities have since imposed a nationwide lockdown that has shut airports, restaurants and schools and prohibited travel between provinces.

‘Valid’ visit

The pandemic has battered Iraq's religious tourism sector, which constitutes around half of

its non-oil economy. A normal year would see millions of Shiite pilgrims visit shrines in Najaf and nearby Karbala, travelling from neighboring Iran or even India. The billions of dollars generated from pilgrims annually creates jobs for hundreds of thousands of Iraqis—constituting almost the only form of tourism in a country ravaged by decades of conflict.

But the narrow alleyways radiating out from the shrines, typically bustling with locals and tourists en route to prayer, are now eerily empty. Wooden stalls where religious trinkets and other souvenirs are usually laid out have been shrouded in plastic for weeks. The sounds of an occasional tweeting bird and the call to prayer five times daily—followed by an addendum to do so at home to avoid crowds—have replaced the din of bartering, clinking coffee cups and shuffling feet. “In these current circumstances, with the confinement imposed by governments across the world, virtual pilgrimages are as valid as the normal ones,” said Ali Al-Atabi, a sheikh in Najaf's Old City.

Religious tourism had already seen a dip since October, when anti-government protests erupted in Baghdad and across the country's Shiite-majority south.

Old rites, new tech

The closures are particularly jarring as most

the worst-off in the Arab world's poorest nation.

Yemen's health system has all but collapsed since the conflict broke out in 2014, with some 20 million people—more than two thirds of the population—needing aid to survive, according to the United Nations.

‘No way to tell’

The government has so far reported 65 coronavirus cases, including 10 deaths.

The Houthi rebels, who control much of the north including the capital Sanaa, have announced two infections, including one death. However, an official in the government's interim capital of Aden said the number of cases could be much higher. “Seventy people died of various diseases in Aden in the 24 hours between Sunday and Monday,” the official, who works in the government's crisis response unit, told AFP.

“It could be from the coronavirus... but in the absence of international organizations and testing, there is no way to tell,” said the official, who asked to remain nameless. The government has accused the Houthis of covering up cases, as Yemenis increasingly clamour for the two parties to set aside the conflict and focus on combatting the pandemic. Around 3.3 million people have been displaced, forced to live in abandoned schools or camps where diseases such as cholera run rampant due to the scarcity of clean water and medication. Aden resident Saddam Bijash complained he had not seen “any tangible measures” to curb the disease. “We expect the virus to spread and for a disaster that no one will be



NAJAF: Numan Al-Saadi, a resident of Najaf, visits the Imam Ali shrine through his phone in Iraq's central holy city of Najaf. — AFP

shrines remained open during the bloodiest years of Iraq's sectarian violence, which saw suicide bombers target religious sites and densely populated neighborhoods.

But over time, some shrines have developed new ways for the faithful to experience a centuries-old tradition. TV channels air round-the-clock images from the mausoleums, and in Najaf,

a hotline provides a free audio guide to visit the site. “Salam aleikum”—peace be upon you—a male voice says in a recorded message, reciting the typical Muslim greeting in Arabic.

“Welcome to a pilgrimage of Imam Ali,” it continues, pausing for the caller to recite the prayer intoned upon entering the shrine in real life. —AFP

Fear of virus grows in Yemen's squalid camps

KHOKHA, Yemen: In a desolate camp for Yemenis displaced by war, Nasima Ahmed wonders how she and her four children can possibly protect themselves as the novel coronavirus stalks the country. The five-year-old conflict between the government and the Iran-backed Houthi rebels has pushed millions to the brink of famine in a country ill-prepared to face the new health threat. “We are not ready for the coronavirus because we have nothing,” Ahmed told AFP at her tent, which is practically empty except for two ragged foam mattresses.

“We need to be able to store food in case a quarantine is imposed,” she said. “I am afraid. I am scared for my children since this virus may lead to our deaths.”

Squalid camps for internally displaced people like the one where Ahmed lives in Khokha, outside the Red Sea port city of Hodeida, are ideal breeding grounds for disease, with little chance of proper sanitation or social distancing. Since the first COVID-19 cases were reported in Yemen last month, anxiety has grown among those living in tents—fashioned from canvas, branches and scraps of plastic—who are among



In this file photo, workers of Yemen's Southern Transitional Council (STC) prepare to drain sewage water from camp flooded by rainwater for Yemenis displaced by conflict from Ta'ez, Ibb, and Hodeida, and currently residing in the Khor Maksar district of the second city of Aden. — AFP

able to control,” he told AFP.

‘Like wildfire’

Caroline Seguin from Doctors Without Borders (MSF) warned the coronavirus could spread “very quickly” in overcrowded cities and camps. “People there often live with many family members in a small space, and camps mostly lack

adequate hygiene measures, making it difficult for them to isolate themselves or to wash their hands,” said Seguin, MSF's head of programs in Yemen, Iraq and Jordan. “Displaced people are also often poor, making it impossible for them just to stay at home while the virus is circulating—they need to go out to earn or collect the basic necessities of life.” — AFP