



India's migrant workers fall through cracks in lockdown

52 villagers killed by jihadists in Mozambique



BORG EL ARAB: In this file photo taken during a guided tour organized by the Egyptian State Information Service, inmates receive medical treatment at the clinic of Borg El-Arab prison near the Egyptian city of Alexandria. — AFP

Virus fear haunts Egypt cramped jails

Prison population estimated at 114,000

CAIRO: Last April, medical student Mohamed Amashah stood on Cairo's Tahrir Square and held up a sign saying "Freedom for prisoners". He was detained. Now awaiting trial for more than a year on charges of misusing social media and helping a terrorist group, the Egyptian-American fears the spread of the coronavirus in Egypt's crowded jails.

Last month Amashah, who suffers from an autoimmune disease and asthma, started a hunger strike to draw attention to his plight, his parents said. He is one of 114,000 prisoners in Egypt, according to a recent UN estimate. Egypt, which has a population of 100 million, has reported 3,490 cases of the new coronavirus, including 264 deaths. Top officials have expressed confidence they can contain the outbreak through measures including quarantine, a night curfew in place since March 25, and public information campaigns.

But since the country's first case on Feb. 14, relatives and rights groups have called for the release of detainees, including political prisoners swept up in a crackdown on dissent under President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi. Some rights groups, lawyers, and current and former prisoners say inmates are often kept in cramped, dirty cells and lack running water, adequate ventilation and healthcare: conditions ripe for the rapid transmission of disease. While countries including Iran, Germany and Canada have freed prisoners in an effort to contain the coronavirus epidemic, Egypt has given no public sign it will do so.

The government press centre forwarded to Reuters an Interior Ministry statement on Thursday saying that it was taking all necessary preventative and protective

measures for prison staff, ensuring cleaning, healthcare and testing inside places of detention. The government also suspended family visits to prisons on March 10 to limit risk of infection, though some families say the measure makes it harder for them to deliver supplies including soap and medicine.

The interior ministry said it allowed for prisoners' belongings to be brought in, and the exchange of messages. In November, authorities organized tightly supervised tours of Cairo's sprawling Tora prison complex, where former President Mohamed Morsi collapsed and died in a prison courtroom last year, and where Amashah is held. The tours followed a report by UN experts that said that poor prison conditions may have led directly to Morsi's death and was putting thousands more at severe risk.

Prison protest

A hunger strike started on several wards at Tora in late February in protest at poor conditions, a lack of information about the new coronavirus and a failure to disinfect cells, said a human rights lawyer in contact with inmates. The lawyer added that the hunger strike had ended after about a week when prison officials began letting in more medicine, clothes and letters.

An Interior Ministry spokesman did not respond to

phone calls or Whatsapp messages asking for comment on the lawyer's account. Amashah continued his protest and was moved to the prison hospital, his father Abdel-Megeed told Reuters, saying he feared his son could suffer the same fate as Moustafa Kassem, an Egyptian-American who died in prison in Egypt in January after staging a liquid-only hunger strike.

"Will they leave him until he dies? I know nothing about him, I am unable to even talk to him to tell him to stop," said Amashah's mother, Naglaa Abdel Fattah. The Interior Ministry spokesman could not be reached for comment on Amashah's case. The US embassy in Cairo declined to comment directly on Amashah, but said it had requested permission to speak with an unspecified number of incarcerated American citizens by phone until visits resumed.

On April 10, a group of bipartisan US senators sent a letter to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo asking him to call for the release of US prisoners, citing the risk from the new coronavirus. The letter mentioned Amashah and 14 other prisoners including two more in Egypt and others in countries including Saudi Arabia, Iran and Syria. The US State Department declined to comment on the letter specifically. David Schenker, Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs, said in Feb-

ruary that detained Americans came up "with some frequency" in dialogue with Egypt.

'State of panic'

Alaa Abdel Fattah, a leading activist in Egypt's 2011 uprising held in remand detention at Tora on charges including spreading false news, belonging to a terrorist organization and misusing social media, also started a hunger strike on April 13, his relatives said. "While Egypt enters its third week of curfew, family members on both sides of the prison walls are being kept in a state of panic," they said in a statement. The Interior Ministry did not respond to a request for comment on Abdel Fattah's situation.

Abdel Fattah's mother, sister and aunt were briefly detained last month after staging a rare public protest to highlight the risk of the coronavirus in prisons. Rights researchers fear guards could bring the virus to prisons and said there had been several suspected cases in Tora and at Wadi al-Natroun prison, northwest of Cairo. Reuters was unable to confirm independently whether any prisoners had tested positive. Two prison sector sources said 14 suspected cases in three prisons had all tested negative. Conditions at prisons vary. One detainee contacted by Reuters said he feared the spread of the virus because physical distancing was impossible at his Cairo prison, where the 15 inmates in his cell each had about 0.5 square meters - not an unusual level of overcrowding, according to researchers. The International Committee of the Red Cross recommends minimum accommodation space globally of 3.4 meters squared for each detainee. — Reuters



Relatives push for prisoners release

US state sues China leaders over virus

MISSOURI: The US state of Missouri on Tuesday sued China's leadership over the COVID-19 coronavirus, seeking damages over what it described as deliberate deception and insufficient action to stop the pandemic. The first-of-a-kind state lawsuit comes amid calls in Congress to punish China and a campaign by President Donald Trump to focus on Beijing's role, amid criticism of his own handling of the crisis. Missouri, led by Trump's Republican Party, filed a lawsuit in a federal court seeking an unspecified amount in damages and an injunction on continuing actions by China

that are alleged to include hoarding of protective equipment.

"The Chinese government lied to the world about the danger and contagious nature of COVID-19, silenced whistleblowers and did little to stop the spread of the disease," Missouri Attorney General Eric Schmitt said. "They must be held accountable for their actions," he said. The lawsuit's chances of success are far from certain as US law, under the principle of sovereign immunity, generally forbids court action against foreign governments. Missouri addressed the issue by suing the ruling Communist Party, arguing that it is not formally an organ of the Chinese state. Citing an estimate that Missouri may lose tens of billions of dollars due to the virus and action to prevent it, the lawsuit accused the Chinese Communist Party of being in "knowing, willful and in reckless disregard of the rights of the state and its residents." — AFP

Virus turns health workers in Egypt into 'outcasts'

CAIRO: After showing symptoms similar to those of the coronavirus, Egyptian doctor Ahmed Negm went into self-isolation in an old apartment, but before long he was hounded out by fearful neighbors. While health workers in many countries are getting cheers and applause for risking their lives in the gruelling battle against the disease, in some parts of the world they face suspicion and hostility.

Though they are regularly hailed by the North African nation's government and media as Egypt's "white (coated) army", many health personnel have complained of being shunned and mistreated by others in society. Negm had already tested negative for the virus but, mindful of the fact that he had frequently dealt with suspected cases, decided to go into confinement as a precaution. As the 31-year-old sealed himself off from the outside world, rumors swirled around his neighborhood in the northeastern province of Ismailia that he was infected and avoiding treatment.

He was even reported to the police. Despite explaining his situation to them, the doctor faced continued harassment, snide remarks and pleas from some of his neighbors to leave the area because "there were many children and elderly." Eventually, Negm moved out. "People are gripped by panic but they're taking it too far to a point where it feels like a stigma," he said. "It's as if we have become outcasts."

Egypt's health workers, like those elsewhere, have been stretched thin by the virus, grappling with long hours, soaring



CAIRO: Egyptians shop at the roofed Khayamiya Street in the old city of the Egyptian capital Cairo ahead of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. — AFP

caseloads and a high risk of catching the disease themselves. Medical staff in several hospitals in Cairo and other provinces have been infected. Four doctors have died out of 43 who fell ill, according to the country's doctors union. Health workers account for some 13 percent of Egypt's total confirmed COVID-19 cases, which have risen above 3,000 including more than 200 fatalities, according to the World Health Organization.

'Worthless apology'

Even after death, one doctor who had caught the virus was targeted by fearful villagers who protested against her burial in Daqahliya province in the Nile Delta. Authorities dispersed the hours-long demonstration and arrested 23 people as part of an investigation into what the public prosecutor described as "an act of terror". Prime Minister Mostafa Madbouli deplored the "disgraceful" act and urged healthcare workers to "pay no heed".

A nurse in the same province who had tested positive for the virus said she and

other infected healthcare workers were contacted by strangers after their names and contact details were widely shared on social media. "Many called to support and pray for us ... but others accused us of spreading the virus and of being the source of infection," she said, wearing a mask, her voice quivering in a video posted online. "We're exhausted. Have mercy on us. Our spirits have been destroyed."

Dina Abdelsalam, a doctor in Ismailia province, said her neighbors publicly smeared her because she works at a hospital which receives suspected coronavirus cases. After recently moving to a new apartment to keep away from her family as a precaution, she said she was startled by her neighbors shouting in the street, accusing her of "bringing the disease" to the area. The police intervened and her neighbors eventually apologized. But for Abdelsalam their apology was "worthless" after they treated her like a "suspected (criminal)". "We (medics) are suffering," she said in an online video, "and you are making it worse." — AFP



MISSOURI: A detail of a protester encouraging people to demand that businesses be allowed to open up, and people allowed to go back to work. The protest was part of a growing national movement against stay-at-home orders designed to slow the spread of the coronavirus. — AFP