

Baghdad, 1 April 2020 – Over the past few years, Iraq’s health system has faced many challenges, including internal conflict and the world’s biggest mass displacement in 2014–2016, all of which had a tough toll on an already fragile health system.

With the detection of COVID-19 in China in December 2019, WHO immediately initiated preparedness efforts, and arranged a series of technical meetings with emergency teams in both federal and regional ministries of health to assess health facilities' resources and preparedness capacities to respond to a potential importation of the disease.



WHO senior management and technical team from the WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean meet with Iraq's Ministry of Health Emergency Cell in March 2020. Photo: WHO/Iraq The sudden eruption of the virus in neighbouring Islamic Republic of Iran scaled up the risk of the disease spread in Iraq and necessitated faster prevention and infection control measures especially in the holy cities and pilgrimage sites, bordering governorates, and vulnerable communities in internally displaced and refugee camps.

“WHO is aware of the impact of a pandemic like COVID-19 on Iraq’s health sector and recovering services,” said Dr Adham Ismail, WHO Representative and Head of Mission in Iraq. “We discussed with the health authorities in the Center and Kurdistan Region the means of urgent support to contain the transmission of the disease in the country. Joint work is underway and cooperation is at highest levels,” he added.

On 2 February, WHO proactively began strengthening national disease surveillance capacities in Iraq and providing case definition and management training, in addition to large-scale risk communications activities.

Hundreds of thousands of prevention and transmission control messages were printed and provided to 20 directorates of health in the 18 governorates, including the Kurdistan region

governorates of Erbil, Dohuk, and Suleimaniya.



Mobile health teams took to main streets, public and religious places, remote cities and hard-to-reach villages in addition to airports, border points, state institutions, and camps hosting refugees and internally displaced people.

Maha Salam and Najah Ahmed from Wasit Directorate of Health in Wasit governorate, eastern Iraq, were among the mobile health team distributing WHO health messages to the public as early as 16 February 2020.



Mobile health workers distribute awareness-raising messages to the public in one Iraqi governorate, in February 2020. Early mobilization campaigns to distribute WHO COVID-19 educational materials succeeded in raising public awareness and readying preparedness efforts to protect individual health and that of the community in general.

WHO is working with the federal and regional ministries of health to increase and augment case management capacities, as well as detection and surveillance.

An urgent consignment of PPEs and laboratory test kits was delivered to ministries of health to enable the timely detection of cases and protect health workers in designated hospitals.

As of 1 April, Iraq reported a total of 697 confirmed cases with 51 deaths and 169 recoveries all over the country. The reported figures are still moderate so far, but WHO expects a spike in the coming two weeks due to the scale up in laboratory testing capacity which are going to be of high importance in terms of infection transmission and control,” concluded Dr Ismail.

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