

Baghdad, Iraq, 19 August 2020 – As the number of COVID-19 cases in Iraq continues to rise, WHO, in partnership with the Ministry of Health and its implementing partners, has just concluded another round of a COVID-19 awareness-raising campaign that intensified community outreach efforts to educate people on measures to limit transmission of the coronavirus. The campaign reached more than 5 million people in 4 densely populated and heavily affected areas in Basra, Wasit, Thi Qar and Missan.

These governorates were the focus of the campaign as each has recorded a high number of cases over the past few months. Recently, the Government of Iraq eased lockdown measures nationwide, opening malls and re-opening its borders, including airports, to resume commercial activities and trade. Both Missan and Basra border the Islamic Republic of Iran and are engaged in commercial activities. To increase community awareness of measures to limit transmission of COVID-19, WHO and the Ministry of Health partnered with United Iraqi Medical Society, community police and the Ministry of Youth and Sports, to disseminate health education messages in these high-risk areas.

"Even if we continue to see an increase in the number of COVID-19 cases in the country, the good news is that death rates due to the disease have decreased in the last week, from 4% to 3%. This is a strong indication that the quality of health care being provided to those infected and hospitalized is good, for which we applaud frontline workers," said Dr Adham Ismail, WHO Representative in Iraq. "Despite the admirable efforts of health care workers, COVID-19 remains a serious public health problem, and until a cure or vaccine is developed, communities need to protect themselves by wearing face masks, practising physical distancing, and washing or sanitizing hands frequently. We count on the citizens to adhere to these preventive measures," added Dr Adham.

The campaign "Your health is important" was conducted in each area for 4 days each using 650 volunteers who used booths, mobile screens and mobile clinics to display educational videos and play audio messages on a range of protective measures. The volunteers distributed more than 360 000 educational materials informing people of measures to limit transmission. The campaign was supported by a number of influential figures, including religious leaders, athletes, artists, and journalists.

"Communities welcomed the campaign because it gave them an opportunity to ask questions firsthand and engage with the campaign teams, this increased the uptake of preventive messages delivered. However, there are a lot of rumours and misinformation circulating in communities, and our teams are working hard to provide people with accurate information," said Dr Ahmed Alheeti, Head of the United Iraqi Medical Society. "The campaign wasn't without its challenges. In Basra, our teams faced demonstrations; however, good working relations with local officials and security meant we were able to access even hard-to-reach areas," added Dr Ahmed.



Next, campaign teams are moving to the Kurdistan region and will be targeting 9 heavily populated, high-risk areas in Sulaymaniyah province from 23 to 31 August 2020. WHO acknowledges the generous support of the Government of Kuwait and the European Union Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid (ECHO) in keeping the people of Iraq safe.

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