

20 June 2020 – The World Health Organization has urged all armed groups in Libya to allow humanitarian agencies to obtain access to health care facilities on the ground, especially in the south, to help combat the recent surge in cases of COVID-19, mainly in the south of the country.

“Humanitarian agencies must be able to safely enter all areas of the country to deliver critical medicines, supplies and personal protection equipment to frontline health care staff treating COVID-19 patients”, said Ms Elizabeth Hoff, WHO Representative in Libya. “It is essential that medical aid reach the most vulnerable communities displaced by fighting and people who face the twin horrors of conflict and pandemic. Unfettered access to health care is a human right, now more than ever.”

As of 17 June 2020, there were 467 confirmed cases of COVID-19 infections in Libya, with ten deaths and 70 recoveries. Thus far, a total of 18 485 tests to detect COVID-19 has been administered. The majority of cases are in Sebha municipality in the south, a major hub on the migration route from Africa to Europe. Between 26 May and 9 June 2020, there was an eightfold increase in COVID-19 cases in Sebha.

In recent weeks, more than 24 000 people have been displaced due to the fighting. Most of them are living in overcrowded conditions that allow for the easy spread of the virus. In addition, the country’s health system is near collapse, with three quarters of Primary Health Care Clinics not functioning due to shortages in medical staff, supplies, medicine, and equipment. These shortages have made it difficult to assess the true impact of COVID-19 on the population. The paucity of early detection “sentinel sites” means that infections can go undetected for weeks, allowing COVID-19 to spread easily within communities. WHO is working with health authorities and partners to enhance disease surveillance and monitoring and deliver critical supplies to support the response to COVID-19. WHO has delivered laboratory equipment, test kits and personal protection equipment (PPE) to the health authorities for distribution throughout the country. A new consignment of PPE and laboratory reagents is expected to arrive in Benghazi shortly.

The Organization is also working to maintain other essential health care services. To meet the health needs of thousands of displaced people from Tarhouna (south of Tripoli), in early June WHO delivered essential health supplies to Al Jufra, Ashshwayrif, Ejdabia, Benghazi and other locations hosting people from Tarhouna. It also delivered health supplies for displaced people fleeing conflict in south Tripoli. The supplies were sent from WHO’s logistics hub in Dubai and

include trauma kits as well as medicines to treat communicable and noncommunicable diseases.

Vaccination is a critical public health concern. [WHO and UNICEF](#) have recently raised the alarm over severe shortages of vaccines in Libya that are putting more than 250 000 children at risk of life-threatening diseases such as measles and polio. Vaccination is essential to maintain population immunity against the epidemic-prone diseases that cause high childhood morbidity and mortality, yet access to vaccination services has been disrupted because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, supplies of many critical vaccines are expected to run out by mid-June.

“Health needs in Libya are immense, and Libyans are now also facing the additional threat of COVID-19,” said Hoff. “Without a ceasefire and sustainable access to all areas across the country, people will continue to die unnecessarily, and children will be exposed to diseases that are entirely preventable with proper vaccination. We cannot allow this to happen.”

WHO has requested US\$ 3.3 million to support the response to COVID-19 in Libya. Thus far, it has received US\$ 2.95 million in contributions and firm pledges, including from China, the UK, France, Canada, Norway and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

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