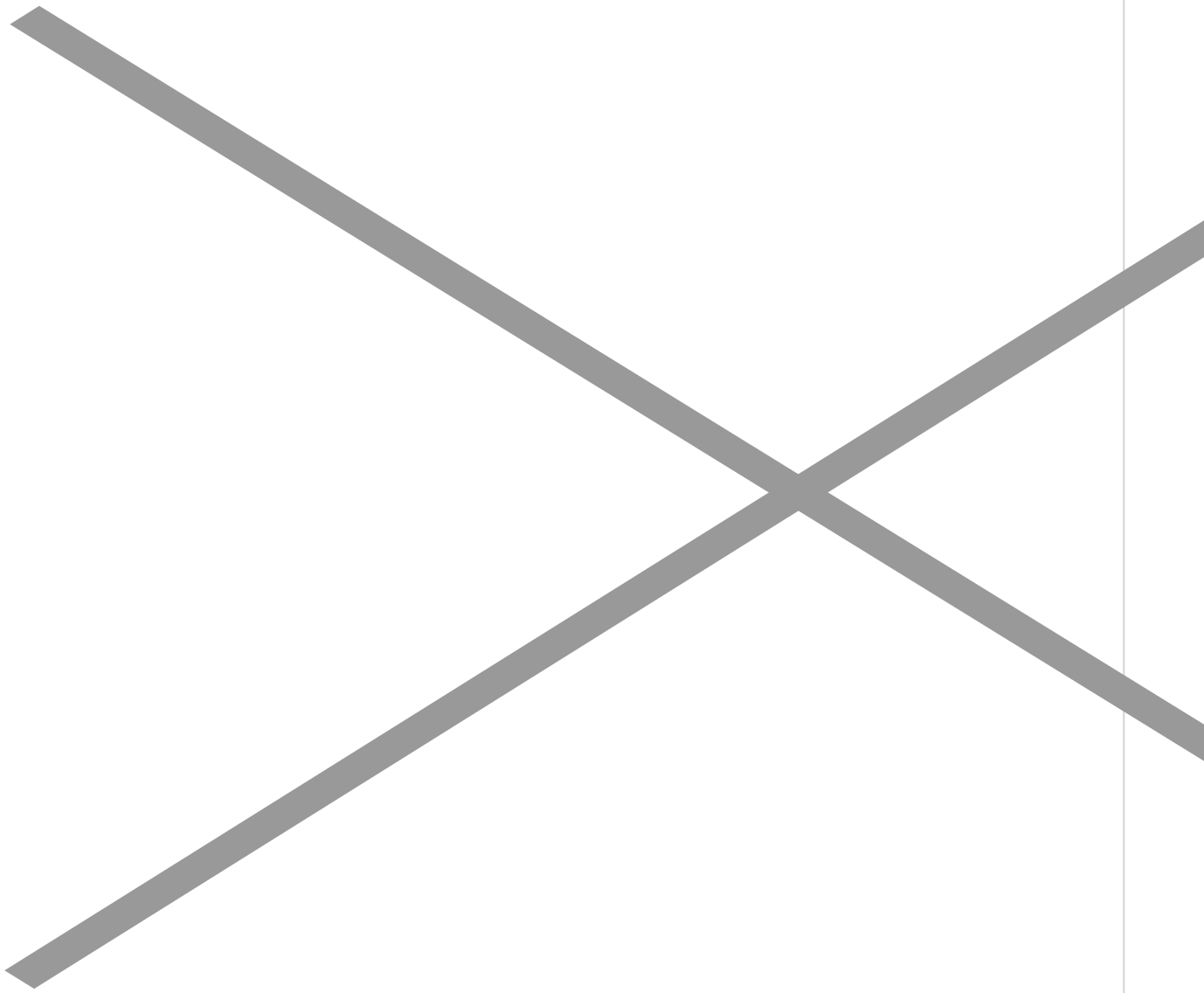# Lebanon health workers warn of COVID catastrophe as cases surge

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Occupancy rate of intensive care units in Lebanon jumps to 90 percent

Beirut, January 2 (RHC)-- Lebanon's hospitals are reportedly being overwhelmed by coronavirus cases, medics warn, as infection rates surge following end of year holidays. The national COVID-19 task force was to meet later on Saturday and expected to advise a three-week lockdown, said Petra Khoury, its head.

Lebanon, with a population of around six million, has recorded 183,888 coronavirus cases, including 1,466 deaths, since February. On Thursday, it hit a daily record of more than 3,500 new cases.

In what he termed a "catastrophic" situation, Sleiman Haroun, head of the Syndicate of Private Hospitals, said "the 50 private hospitals in the country receiving patients with COVID-19 are now almost full." They have a total of 850 beds, including 300 in intensive care units, Haroun said. "Patients are now waiting in line … waiting for a bed to be free," he told AFP news agency.

After imposing tougher restrictions in November to combat the spread of the pandemic, the government relaxed rules ahead of the December holidays by pushing back a nighttime curfew to 3am and allowing nightclubs and bars to reopen.

The move prompted criticism from health professionals who warned bed occupancy in intensive care units was running critically low. "The problem is that once a patient is admitted to intensive care, they stay there for three weeks," said Khoury.

The "gatherings and private parties" of the December holiday season have fed a dramatic rise in cases, Khoury said. "Over the past three weeks, the occupancy rate of intensive care units has increased by 10 percent," pushing the occupancy of hospital beds in Beirut to over 90 percent of capacity.

"We have been asked by several hospitals not to transfer patients to them," Lebanese Red Cross president Georges Kettaneh told AFP. Instead, the Red Cross was taking patients to Bekaa in the east or Nabatiyeh in the south.

Lebanon is expecting to receive its first shipment of coronavirus vaccines in February from Pfizer-BioNTech.

The country has been grappling with its worst economic crisis since the 1975-1990 civil war. The Lebanese pound has lost more than two-thirds of its value against the dollar on the black market, leading prices to skyrocket.

More than half of the population is trapped in poverty, according to the United Nations. Beirut was also hit by an August 4 explosion at its port that killed more than 200 people and devastated swaths of the capital.

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