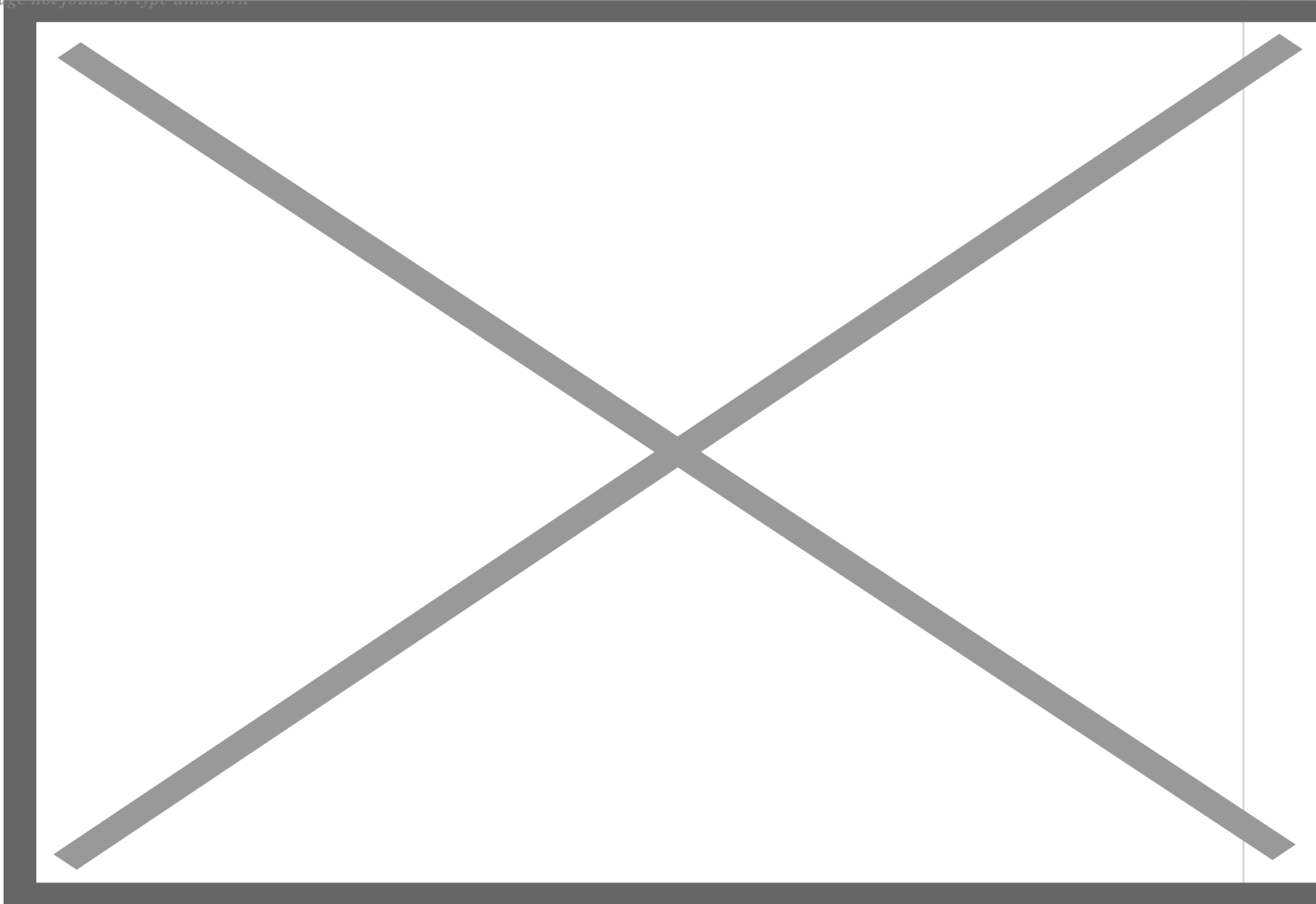


WHO warns of catastrophic coronavirus surge in Middle East

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Tunisian medics attend to patients at a gym that was converted to deal with a surge in new COVID-19 infections in the city of Kairouan [Fethi Belaid/AFP]

Tunis, July 14 (RHC)-- A surge of coronavirus cases in several Middle Eastern countries could have dire consequences, aggravated by the spread of the Delta variant and low vaccine availability, the World Health Organization said on Wednesday.

After a decline in cases and deaths for eight weeks, the agency said there had been significant increases in cases in Libya, Iran, Iraq and Tunisia, with sharp rises expected in Lebanon and Morocco.

Next week countries across the region will mark the Muslim Eid al-Adha holiday, which traditionally includes religious and social gatherings where infections could spread. “WHO is concerned that the current COVID-19 upsurge may continue to peak in the coming weeks, with catastrophic consequences,” the agency’s regional office said in a statement.

A lack of adherence to public health and social measures and “increasing complacency by communities”, as well as low vaccination rates and the spread of new variants, were to blame, WHO said.

The agency highlighted Tunisia as the country with the highest coronavirus mortality rate per capita in the region and in Africa, and noted daily cases had almost doubled in Iran during the four weeks into early July.

Overall, the number of reported COVID-19 cases in the Eastern Mediterranean region, which includes Pakistan, Afghanistan, Somalia and Djibouti as well as Middle Eastern states, had surpassed 11.4 million, the statement said. More than 223,000 deaths have been reported, it added.

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