

Coronavirus test kits run out in Gaza as collapse fears grow

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Technician handling PCR (polymerase chain reaction) swab samples collected as part of coronavirus disease testing in the Gaza Strip. (Photo: AFP)

Gaza City, December 9 (RHC)-- Health officials in Gaza City that they could no longer carry out coronavirus tests in the Gaza Strip because of a lack of kits amid a spike in cases in the besieged Palestinian territory. The health ministry called for urgent action "to provide the necessary equipment" to

screen the population for the virus.

The only laboratory in the territory able to analyse COVID-19 test samples had ceased its work “due to a lack of equipment”, the ministry said in a statement. “We haven’t received any of the testing materials for the last four days,” said Ameer Mushtaha, director of the lab.

He said the health ministry asked the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations, and the Palestinian Authority (PA) to immediately send medical supplies to Gaza. But the PA, which rules the Palestinian territories in the West Bank, is suffering from its own shortage of tests and has also turned to the WHO for more.

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees has warned that the Gaza Strip’s health system could collapse if the number of cases continues to rise. The PA will receive COVID-19 vaccines from the COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access Facility (COVAX). Gaza will get a share of those, but it is not yet known when.

Senior Hamas official and former health minister Bassem Naim said authorities usually carry out “between 2,500 and 3,000 tests per day at a cost of between \$75,000 and \$100,000.” “There is an urgent need to take measures to save the lives of Gaza’s citizens and contain the crisis,” he told AFP news agency.

The tiny, densely populated enclave is home to two million people and has been under Israeli blockade since 2007. Egypt has also sealed its border with Gaza. Authorities closed Gaza’s borders early in the pandemic, only allowing entry to a limited number of people who were then required to isolate for three weeks in quarantine centres.

In mid-August, Gaza recorded only about 100 coronavirus cases, but the past two weeks have seen a steep deterioration in containment. Hamas last week announced a lockdown on weekends lasting from December 11 to the end of the month. It also closed schools, universities, kindergartens and mosques.

In total, the Palestinian health ministry has recorded more than 74,160 COVID-19 cases, including nearly 700 deaths, in the West Bank. In Gaza, nearly 25,600 infections have been officially registered, including about 150 deaths.

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