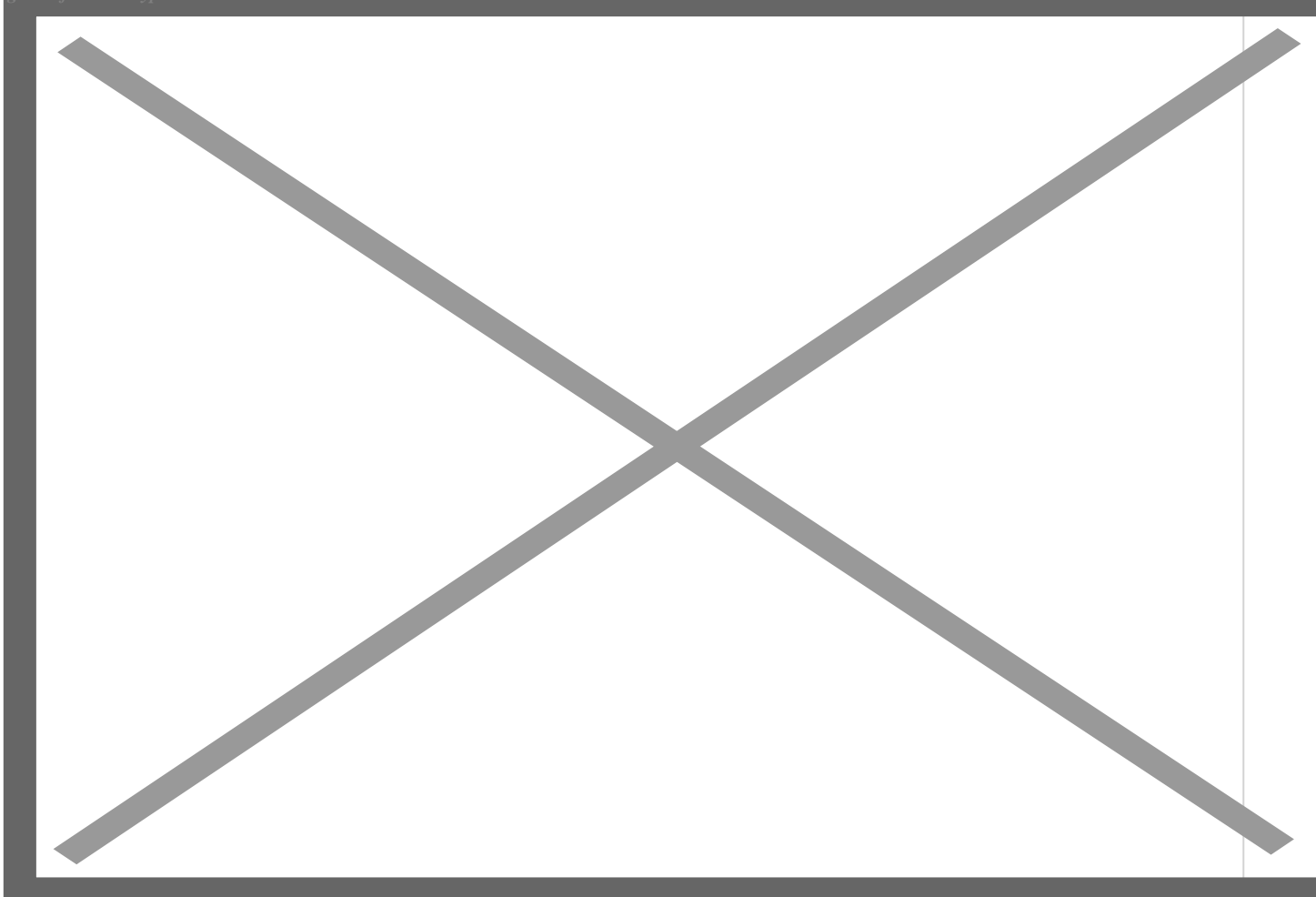


Palestinian health minister recommends lockdown in the West Bank

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The occupied territory is witnessing a 20-30 percent increase in COVID-19 cases as hospital beds are near full capacity. (Photo: Ahmad Gharabli/AFP)

Ramallah, February 26 (RHC)-- The Palestinian Health Ministry has recommended a two-week lockdown amid a surge in coronavirus infections across the West Bank.

Palestinian Authority's Health Minister Mai al-Kaila suggested Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh implement a comprehensive closure as positive cases have increased by some 20-30 percent, while hospital beds in several places are nearing full capacity, according to a statement on the ministry website.

"This is the third wave of the coronavirus outbreak in Palestine," al-Kaila told local media on Friday. "And it is the most difficult period we have experienced since the beginning of the pandemic."

The marked increase in the number of infected people is linked to the appearance of the new strains first reported in the United Kingdom and South Africa, the minister said, adding that cases related to the Brazilian strain have not been detected so far.

Coronavirus cases in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip have reached nearly 180,000, while more than 2,000 people have died, according to Johns Hopkins University.

The PA started its vaccination campaign in the West Bank on February 2 following the arrival of 2,000 doses from Israel, in addition to 10,000 doses from Russia.

The Gaza strip followed suit with a limited inoculation roll-out that began on Monday thanks to vaccines donated by Moscow and the United Arab Emirates.

Israel has become a real-world test laboratory since it signed an agreement with Pfizer, promising to share medical data with the drug manufacturer in exchange for the continued flow of its vaccine.

United Nations officials and human rights groups have voiced concerns over the inequity in vaccine distribution and said Israel, as an occupying power, has an obligation to help the Palestinians.

Israel says that under interim peace accords, the PA is responsible.

On Thursday, the PA condemned Israel's promise to send coronavirus vaccines to far-away countries while ignoring the five-million Palestinians living under its occupation. Honduras was the first one to receive a shipment of COVID-19 vaccines, after Israeli media reported earlier this week the government's intention to send vaccines to the Central American country, in addition to Guatemala, Hungary and the Czech Republic.

In a report published on Monday, the World Bank urged Israel to consider donating surplus doses to the Palestinians to help accelerate a vaccine roll-out in the occupied West Bank and Gaza. The report added that Palestinians' COVID-19 vaccination plan faces a \$30 million funding shortfall, even after factoring in support from a global vaccine scheme for poorer economies.

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