

Fears new COVID wave could overwhelm Lebanon's health system

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Lebanon has seen an increase in coronavirus infections in recent days [File: Mohamed Azakir/Reuters]

Beirut, July 18 (RHC)-- Doctors have warned that hospitals in Lebanon would struggle to cope with a large influx of coronavirus patients amid a surge in the number of new cases spurred by the highly

contagious Delta variant.

Lebanon recorded 577 new COVID-19 infections in a 24-hour period on Friday, according to the health ministry, the first time that more than 500 daily cases have been reported since May. The number of new cases recorded on Saturday was slightly lower, with 488 new confirmed infections, bringing the total number of cases since the beginning of the outbreak to 550,492.

Dubbed as the “fastest and fittest” of the coronavirus variants by the World Health Organization (WHO), the Delta variant is highly transmissible and has spread to dozens of countries around the world.

Medical experts warned that a new wave of the coronavirus could put unbearable pressure on the fragile health system, which has come under increased strain since the beginning of country’s economic and financial crises in late 2019. “This [rise in coronavirus cases] is an exacerbation of what is already a difficult situation,” Dr Firass Abiad, Head of the Rafik Hariri University Hospital (RHUH) told Al Jazeera.

“Our resources to deal with a new [COVID-19] wave are not what they were a year ago, or even last summer,” he said. “We are not well-prepared against what appears to be a dangerous variant [Delta],” he said.

Dr Abiad said that RHUH, the largest public hospital in Lebanon, was able to cope with the devastating coronavirus wave at the beginning of 2021 because the hospital had received donations following the Beirut explosion that took place in August 2020.

The number of patients with coronavirus admitted to RHUH had increased in recent days, he noted. “Whether it’s because other hospitals have closed down their coronavirus wings or because cases have increased, it’s early to say,” Dr Abiad explained.

RHUH has played a central role in Lebanon’s coronavirus response since the virus was first detected in the country in early 2020.

Like many other hospitals in Lebanon, RHUH is already facing an array of challenges stemming from the country’s economic crisis. In recent weeks, there have been severe power cuts with some areas receiving as little as one hour of state-provided electricity per day, which has, in turn, placed immense pressure on backup power generators. Separately, a fuel crisis has meant that these generators cannot run around the clock. “We need a large amount of fuel for our generators but there is a shortage,” Dr Abiad said, adding that RHUH’s generators are under the risk of breakdown.

This in turn has put the patients’ wellbeing in jeopardy, Dr Abiad said. A doctor at the Sibling Governmental Hospital, who requested anonymity, said that the hospital cannot take in coronavirus patients. “We don’t have enough electricity to plug in an oxygen machine,” he said.

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