

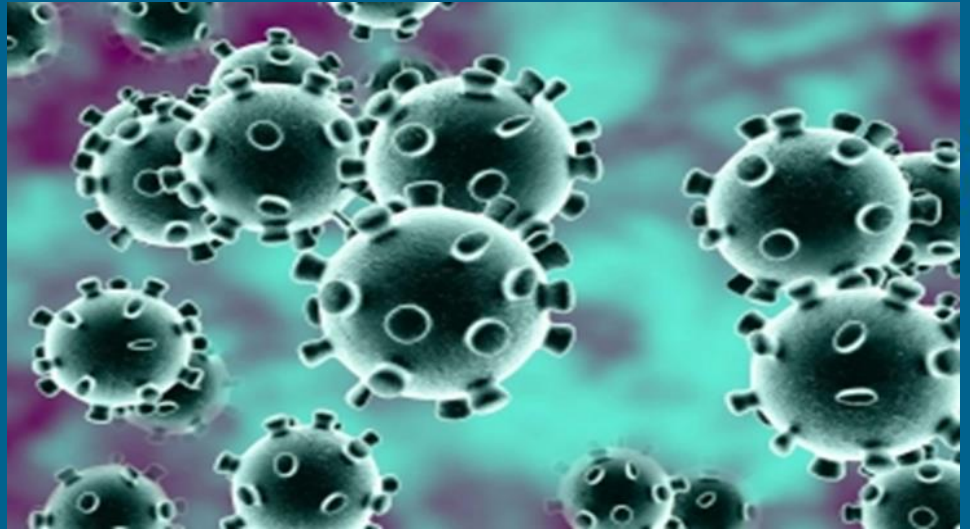


مجلس كنائس الشرق الأوسط

The Middle East Council of Churches

Middle East Overview – March 2020

Coronavirus (Covid-19) outbreak in the ME



Covid-19 representation, March 2020, Photo Credit: Archdiocese of Cardiff.

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1. BACKGROUND

Since January, a menace crept from the Far East and tainted more than 120 nations. Occupying nearly every news headline in March, Coronavirus or COVID-19 became an imminent threat to our way of life. As the death toll increased, nations closed its borders, hospitals were placed on high alert, and people were being put in quarantine spaces. Starting off in one country and now becoming a pandemic, some estimate that 70% of humans worldwide will be exposed to this virus. Since the Middle East is no stranger to any humanitarian disaster, the virus unsurprisingly appeared in our area.

During this month, even before local governments declared a national state of emergency, the MECC preemptively closed all its offices, to protect its missionaries and to deter the spreading of the disease. Moreover, the team members start working from home and launched a social media campaign about prevention methods and information related to the pandemic. Complementing local governments, it urged all citizens of the ME region to stay home and to adopt precautionary measures.



2. THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC SITUATION

Egypt

- Rania Al-Mashat, Egyptian international cooperation minister, convened with the Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic Development (KFAED) to discuss the issue of financing the second phase of development projects in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula, worth 1.1 billion USD.¹
- Gamal Negm, the Deputy Governor of the Central Bank of Egypt (CBE), assured during March that Egyptian banks have liquidity allowing them to grant loans and support the national economy.²
- Trade and Industry Minister Nevine Gamae, at the Women World Economic Forum held in Cairo, claimed that Small & Medium Enterprise Development Agency (MSME) will implement a number of activities to back and empower women in the area of business administration.³
- During a meeting with senior journalists to discuss the FY202/2021 draft budget, Egypt's Minister of Finance Mohamed Maait assured Egyptians that the country has recovered and is ready to face external economic variables.⁴
- As a result of the corona virus pandemic, gold prices have jumped within Egypt in March.⁵
- The Central Bank of Egypt (CBE) postponed the installments of loans to micro, small, and medium projects for a period of six months, to contain the economic repercussions of the Coronavirus pandemic.⁶
- 15.6983 EG/USD official currency exchange rate.⁷

¹ Middle East Monitor, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200305-egypt-kuwait-in-talks-on-financing-development-projects-in-sinai/>

² Egypt Today March 4, 2020, <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/3/82313/CBE-has-liquidity-enough-to-support-national-economy-Official>

³ Egypt Today, March 5, 2020, <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/3/82348/Trade-min-Women-s-empowerment-contributes-to-developing-economy>

⁴ Ahram, March 10, 2020, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/3/12/365039/Business/Economy/Egypt-economy-recovered,-ready-to-absorb-likely-g.aspx>

⁵ Egypt Independent, March 9, 2020, <https://egyptindependent.com/gold-prices-jump-in-egypt-as-coronavirus-fears-weigh-on-global-economy/>

⁶ Zawya, March 15, 2020, https://www.zawya.com/mena/en/business/story/Central_Bank_of_Egypt_takes_measures_against_Coronavirus_repercussions_on_economy-SNG_170117865/

⁷ <http://www.cbe.org.eg/en/EconomicResearch/Statistics/Pages/ExchangeRatesListing.aspx>



Jordan

- To encourage investment and economic growth, the Central Bank of Jordan claimed that it will cut main rates by 50 bps.⁸
- The Jordanian government imposed measures to fight the covid-19 outbreak, including a tighter lockdown that closes all borders and bans all incoming and outgoing flights.⁹
- Jordan's Central Bank declared new measures to help the troubled businesses and tourism sector, which were hit hard by the corona virus threat.¹⁰
- Prime Minister Omar Razzaz chaired a meeting to discuss the formation of an integrated plan for various sectors that would be affected and to address issues related to foreign and domestic trade.¹¹
- The Jordanian government decided to form 10 ministerial teams, which include a healthcare team, a borders, border-crossings and airports affairs organization team, a social protection team, a strategic stock team and a remote learning and education team, to oversee and ensure continuity of work.¹²
- The World Bank approved Youth, Technology and Jobs project worth 200 million USD to improve digital services and access to jobs for youth in Jordan.¹³
- 1.428 USD Jordanian official currency value.¹⁴

⁸ Reuters, March 4, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/jordan-cenbank-rates/update-2-jordan-to-cut-main-rates-by-50-bps-to-spur-growth-idUSL8N2AX391>

⁹ Middle East Eye, March 16, 2020, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/coronavirus-two-left-dead-prison-riot-jordan-after-visits-banned>

¹⁰ Reuters, March 16, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-jordan/jordans-coronavirus-cases-rise-as-it-moves-to-cushion-economy-idUSKBN212154>

¹¹ Ammon News, March 12, 2020, <http://en.ammonnews.net/article.aspx?artid=42729#.Xm9bVagzZPY>

¹² Mena Fn, March 15, 2020, <https://menafn.com/1099858483/Ministers-touch-base-on-impacts-of-coronavirus-new-measures>

¹³ Zawya, March 21, 2020,

https://www.zawya.com/mena/en/economy/story/World_Bank_approves_200mIn_project_to_improve_digital_services_access_to_jobs_for_youth_in_Jordan-SNG_170768180/

¹⁴ <http://statisticaldb.cbj.gov.jo/index?action=level4>



Iraq

- The Trade Bank of Iraq, at the Global Trade Review (GTR) MENA 2020 summit held in Dubai, promoted investment opportunities.¹⁵
- Iraq's Oil Ministry claimed that more than 98 million barrels of crude oil was exported in February.¹⁶
- Iraq's Kurdish region has imposed a lockdown due to the spread of corona virus. Several hotels have been commandeered for the use of treating people sick with the virus.¹⁷
- Iraq's Kurdish region ordered oil and gas companies operating in Iraq's Kurdish region, to curtail office operations and local and international travel.¹⁸
- Officials in Iraq's oil and health sectors during March have quarantined several individuals suspected of carrying the corona virus.¹⁹
- Iraq's Oil Ministry decreed shift reductions and cancelled group meetings and trainings, in an attempt to protect the oil sector which provides 90% of state revenue.
- 1190 Dinar /USD Iraqi official currency exchange rate.²⁰

Lebanon

- After a financial prosecutor's decision to freeze the assets of 20 banks, their boards of directors and chairpersons, a judge suspended the decision.²¹
- On the 9th of March, Lebanon defaulted on its 1.2 Euro Bond debt; the first sovereign default in its history.²²

¹⁵ Zawya, Feb 26, 2020, https://www.zawya.com/mena/en/press-releases/story/Trade_Bank_of_Iraq_showcases_investment_opportunities_in_Iraq_at_Global_Trade_Review_MENA_2020_summit-ZAWYA20200226094355/

¹⁶ Hellenicshipping News, March 3, 2020, <https://www.hellenicshippingnews.com/iraqs-crude-oil-exports-exceed-98-million-barrels-in-february/>

¹⁷ Rudaw, March 14, 2020, <https://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/14032020>

¹⁸ Iraq Oil Reporter, March 15, 2020, <https://www.iraqoilreport.com/news/kg-issues-new-anti-coronavirus-orders-to-oil-firms-42591/>

¹⁹ Iraq Oil Report, March 14, 2020, <https://www.iraqoilreport.com/news/iraqs-health-sector-fears-coronavirus-overload-42588/>

²⁰ <http://www.cbiraq.org/DataValues.aspx?dtFrm=10/31/2003&dtTo=02/18/2019&tmid=175&dtformat=MMM,yyyy>

²¹ Al Jazeera, March 6, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/ajimpact/lebanon-prosecutor-orders-assets-frozen-20-local-banks-200305165951273.html>

²² Economist, March 12, 2020, <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2020/03/12/for-the-first-time-lebanon-defaults-on-its-debts>



- According to Raoul Nehme, Minister of Economy and Trade, banks will seek to cooperate with the government rather than try to sue it, over its inability to pay the Euro bond debt.²³
- AM Best, a U.S.-based credit rating agency, reported that the insurance Market is in a state of “mounting uncertainty” due to the socio-economic and political turmoil the country is experiencing.²⁴
- The IMF (International Monetary fund) has recommended that the Lebanese government to move with haste to implement reforms to stabilize the country's economy.²⁵
- Lebanese Prime Minister Hassan Diab declared "general mobilization" on the 15th of March due to the coronavirus outbreak. Borders, airports were closed between March 18-29.²⁶
- 1507.5 LBP/ USD Lebanon official currency exchange rate.²⁷

Palestine

- In an outstanding gesture by the Ecommerce giant Amazon, the global company declared that it will no longer be charging Palestine delivery charges. According to the source, it linked the policy reversal by Amazon to “a series of Palestinian measures aiming at halting disregard to the Palestinian identity and recognizing settlements.”²⁸
- The Palestinian Authority declared a 30-day state of emergency to tackle coronavirus outbreak.²⁹
- Shoes and clothes factories in the West Bank have been converted to produce facemasks and protective suits amid the coronavirus outbreak.³⁰
- Jordan closed down its border with the West Bank in a bid to prevent the spread of the coronavirus.³¹

²³ Aawsat, March 9, 2020, <https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/2171152/economy-minister-lebanon-awaits-creditors-decision-whether-cooperate-sue-it>

²⁴ Naharnet, March 6, 2020, <http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/269852>

²⁵ Aawsat, March 12, 2020, <https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/2176891/imf-urges-swift-implementation-economic-reforms-lebanon>

²⁶ <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/latest-on-coronavirus-outbreak/lebanon-declares-state-of-emergency-due-to-coronavirus/1767277>

²⁷ <http://www.bdl.gov.lb/>

²⁸ Middle East Monitor, March 4, 2020, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200304-amazon-will-now-deliver-for-free-to-palestine/>

²⁹ Middle East Monitor, March 13, 2020, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200313-palestine-declares-state-of-emergency-to-tackle-coronavirus-outbreak/>

³⁰ Xinhuanet, March 15, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-03/16/c_138880973.htm

³¹ Middle East Eye, March 10, 2020, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/coronavirus-jordan-closes-border-palestine-iraq-egypt>



Syria

- Syrians rushed to stock up on food and fuel before authorities resorted to stricter measures on public life after reporting the first coronavirus infection in the country, where the healthcare system has been decimated by nearly a decade of civil war.³²
- The British government slightly relaxed restrictions on buying oil products within Syria, while the U.S. government put the Syrian Minister of Defense under sanctions.³³
- The government has agreed to subsidize loans granted to Aleppo industrialists in a bid to kick start investment in Syria's traditional manufacturing hub.³⁴
- The government started distributing one additional item through its smart card system and increasing the quantity of goods sold to large families.³⁵
- Syria's Grain Establishment called on traders to bid for new supplies of wheat outside of the tender process as it seeks to sign its first purchase contracts since the beginning of the year.³⁶
- The Central Bank of Syria is issuing new certificates of deposit to raise funds for the government and is also easing restrictions on cash transfers in and out of the country in a bid to attract more foreign currencies.
- The Interior Ministry announced that all crossing points have been closed for arrivals from Lebanon as part of the steps to confront the Coronavirus.³⁷
- Current Exchange Rate in Black Market 1050 - 1100 SP/USD

Cyprus

- The Cypriot government declared health emergency as it shut down businesses and enforced a lock down on the country as the corona virus spreads worldwide.³⁸
- The government decided to allocate a 700 million Euro financial aid package to mitigate the economic impact of the virus.³⁹

³² AP News, March 23, 2020, <https://apnews.com/3d53ea9ef263dbe66e721dd3b351ad2a>

³³ <https://www.syria-report.com/>

³⁴ <https://www.syria-report.com/>

³⁵ <https://www.syria-report.com/>

³⁶ <https://www.syria-report.com/>

³⁷ Sana, March 22, 2020, <https://sana.sy/en/?p=188685>

³⁸ Financial Mirror, March 15, 2020, <https://www.financialmirror.com/2020/03/15/covid19-cyprus-shutters-businesses-as-health-emergency-declared/>

³⁹ Financial Mirror, March 16, 2020, <https://www.financialmirror.com/2020/03/16/covid19-cyprus-pushes-out-e700-mln-liferaft-for-economy/>



- Panicos Nicolaou, Chief Executive Officer of Bank of Cyprus, declared that his bank is ready to support Cyprus in these dire times. Also, he encouraged employees and customers to stay at home.⁴⁰
- The European Central Bank has announced a capital buffer for Cypriot systemic banking institutions amounting to €1.3 billion.⁴¹
- 1. 1157 USD Euro official currency value⁴²

3. THE REFUGEE SITUATION (Updated)

Egypt

- In partnership with the Egypt National Post (ENPO) and the UNHCR, IrisGuard, a supplier of eye recognition technology, deployed its biometric mobile platform EyePay Cash to securely distribute financial aid to refugees in the country.⁴³
- Director of the World Health Organization (WHO) Cairo office John Jabbour declared that refugees and citizens will get equal treatment against corona virus.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Cyprus Mail, March 17, 2020, <https://cyprus-mail.com/2020/03/17/bank-of-cyprus-ready-to-support-the-economy-says-ceo/>

⁴¹ In Cyprus, <https://in-cyprus.com/cbc-governorbanks-should-transmit-capital-cushion-to-economy/>

⁴² https://www.ecb.europa.eu/stats/policy_and_exchange_rates/euro_reference_exchange_rates/html/eurofxref-graph-usd.en.html

⁴³ Biometric Update, Feb 24, 2020, <https://www.biometricupdate.com/202002/iris-biometrics-from-irisguard-to-enable-paperless-disbursement-of-refugee-cash-aid-in-egypt>

⁴⁴ Egypt Today, March 18, 2020, <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/1/82766/Covid-19-WHO-rep-says-Egypt-provides-equal-care-to>



Jordan

The UNHCR states that there are currently 656,103 registered refugees in Jordan up until the beginning of March.

The proportion of Syrian displaced people registered within the UNHCR for March, are distributed as follows:

- 193,644 in Amman Governorate (29.5 %)
 - 162,268 in Mafraq Governorate (24.8%)
 - 134,730 in Irbid Governorate (20.6%)
 - 94,996 in Zarqa Governorate (14.5%)
 - 18,589 in Balqa Governorate (2.8%)
 - 13,038 in Madaba Governorate (2%)
 - 9,286 in Jarash Governorate (1.4%)
 - 8,497 in Karak Governorate (1.3%)
 - 8,363 in Maan Governorate (1.3%)
 - 6,558 in Ajlun Governorate (1.0%)
 - 3,655 in Aqaba Governorate (0.6%)
 - 1,717 in Tafilah Governorate (0.3%)
- According to the UNHCR, Jordan's Financial Requirements for 2020 which amount to 356.4 million USD, has been 12% funded up until March 6, 2020.⁴⁵
 - The Jordanian authorities imposed a lockdown on the high-risk refugee camps to prevent the spread of coronavirus.⁴⁶

Iraq

The UNHCR states that there are currently 248,162 registered Syrian refugees in Iraq.

The proportion of displaced Syrian people registered within the UNHCR up until the beginning of March, are distributed as follows:

- 124,546 in Erbil (50.2%)

⁴⁵ <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/74666>

⁴⁶ The National, March 16, 2020, <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/coronavirus-jordan-closes-off-syrian-refugee-camps-to-contain-virus-1.993381>



- 89,182 in Dahuk (35.9%)
 - 31,511 in Sulaymaniyah (12.7%)
 - 1,140 in Anbar (0.5%)
 - 1,783 in other areas (0.7%)⁴⁷
- Authorities have imposed on refugee and IDP camps in Iraq stringent rules, including closing schools and preventing the re-entry of refugees for more than 30 days.⁴⁸

Lebanon

Since the beginning of February, the number of registered refugees in Lebanon is 910,256.

Refugees in Lebanon are distributed as follows:

- 344,013 in Bekaa (37.8%)
 - 241,102 in North Lebanon (26.5%)
 - 222,944 in Beirut (24.5%)
 - 102,197 in South Lebanon (11.2%)⁴⁹
- Health Minister Hamad Hassan claimed that the refugee crisis is a burden shared between the state and the UN. However, he stressed that the international community had been slow to react.⁵⁰
 - According to the Syrian Ambassador to Lebanon, Ali Abdel Karim Ali, a high number of Syrians in Lebanon are applying to return to Syria due to Coronavirus concerns.⁵¹
 - The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) spokesperson in Lebanon, Hoda Samra claimed that there have been no cases of the coronavirus reported among Palestinian refugees in Lebanon up until 11th of March, due to the preventive measures being taken and the sterilization drives being executed on streets and alleyways.⁵²

⁴⁷ <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/5>

⁴⁸ Rudaw Net, March 17, 2020, <https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/17032020>

⁴⁹ <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/71>

⁵⁰ Middle East Online, March 19, 2020, <https://middle-east-online.com/en/refugees-lebanon-face-coronavirus-few-resources>

⁵¹ The 961, March 18, 2020, <https://www.the961.com/syrian-refugees-in-lebanon-want-to-return-home-due-to-coronavirus-concerns/>

⁵² Middle East Monitor, March 11, 2020, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200311-un-no-coronavirus-cases-among-palestinian-refugees-in-lebanon/>



Syria

- The number of people without reliable access to food is nearly 8 million and, in just one year, has increased by more than 20 per cent. Across the country, 500,000 children are chronically malnourished.
- The number of displaced people seeking refuge in informal settlements and collective camps has increased by 42 per cent year on year, to a total of 1.2 million this year.
- Turkish forces, stationed in Allouk water purification station in Ras Al-Ain countryside interrupted drinking water which supplies Al-Hasakah city and surrounding areas in its countryside once again, a few days after being re-pumped.
- On the 4th of March, WHO/Health Sector conducted an awareness raising session in Qamishli, AlHasakeh governorate for 25 participants from UNHCR, UNDP, UNICEF, UNDSS, UNFPA, and OCHA.
- As of 8 March 2020, the total estimated IDP population is 549,000 within Idlib and western Aleppo and 410,000 in northern Aleppo.
- Between 23 February and 8 March 2020, an estimated 11,170 additional people were newly displaced in opposition held northwest Syria.

Cyprus

- Cypriot Interior Minister Nicos Nouris claimed that the country cannot receive refugees whatsoever. However, he assured that Cyprus will continue to provide for the ones in the country.⁵³
- The Cypriot Coastal Guard prevented 175 illegal refugees from entering Cyprus.⁵⁴
- The UN High Commission for Refugees in Cyprus urged authorities to speed up examination of asylum applications rather preventing the arrival of refugees.⁵⁵

⁵³ In Cyprus, March 3, 2020, <https://in-cyprus.com/minister-cyprus-cannot-absorb-any-more-economic-migrants-will-protect-refugees/>

⁵⁴ Daily Sabah, March 22, 2020, <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/eu-affairs/trnc-rescues-asylum-seekers-rejected-by-greek-cyprus-from-mediterranean-sea>

⁵⁵ In Cyprus, March 4, 2020, <https://in-cyprus.com/unhcr-urges-speeding-up-review-of-asylum-applications-to-ease-migratory-pressure/>



4. CHURCH ACTIVITIES

Egypt

- In response to the coronavirus outbreak, the Egyptian Church in Tanta, in the north of the country, issued a number of preventive measures to protect participants in the liturgy prayers and to raise the level of health and medical awareness among the people.⁵⁶
- His Holiness Pope Tawadros II of Alexandria and Patriarch of the Holy See of St. Mark, prayed for the martyrs of Egypt, in a video published by the official website of the Ministry of Defense, on the anniversary on March 9 of each year Martyrs Day, which is the memory of the martyrdom of Lieutenant-General Abdel Moneim Riad, chief of staff of the Armed Forces war, in 1969.⁵⁷
- His Holiness Pope Tawadros II delivered his condolences to His Excellency Anba Theophilus, Bishop of the Parish Diocese of Manfalut, and to the congregation of the priesthood for the departure of the Priest Leader of the Parish Father Andrew John.⁵⁸

Jordan

- On the 28th of February, the council of the Christian Alliance Church in Jordan and Palestine reelected reverend Bashar Nemat as head of the council for a second three-year term.⁵⁹
- A workshop on governance and transparency was held at the Evangelical Free Church in Amman's Khalda neighborhood, where nearly 40 church and para-church evangelical leaders from Jordan participated.⁶⁰
- The heads and representatives of the local Orthodox Churches held a meeting in Amman, Jordan on Wednesday, February 26, 2020, out of a fundamental vision towards unity and the restoration of the

⁵⁶ Al-Ain, March 4, 2020, <https://al-ain.com/article/egyptian-church-corona-cristian>

⁵⁷ Youm7, March 7, 2020, <https://www.youm7.com/story/2020/3/7/>

⁵⁸ El Balad, March 4, 2020, <https://www.elbalad.news/4199678>

⁵⁹ Mena Fn, March 5, 2020, <https://menafn.com/1099808236/Reverend-Bashar-Nemat-reelected-head-of-Alliance-Church-in-Jordan-and-Palestine>

⁶⁰ Mena Fn, March 1, 2020, <https://menafn.com/1099783724/Jordan-Workshop-on-Governance-in-Evangelical-Institutions>



Eucharistic Union in the Holy Orthodox. The participants affirmed their understanding of the concern of the Patriarchate of Jerusalem regarding the threat posed by the split of the Orthodox Union.⁶¹

Iraq

- His Holiness Cardinal Louis Raphael Sako, Patriarch of Babylon of the Chaldeans and head of the Chaldean Catholic Church, urged people "to learn from the past to respect each other" and to "live in peace" during his tribute for the Iraqi Christian Martyrs.⁶²
- His Holiness Cardinal Louis Raphael Sako and his assisting Bishops (Mar Shalimon Wardoni, Mar Basilio Yildo and Mar Robert Gerges) convened with the priests of Baghdad at the headquarters of the Chaldean Patriarchate to discuss the corona virus situation, ways of spreading awareness, and methods of containing it. The meeting dealt with the general situation in Iraq and how to face the threat of Coronavirus and guide the believers to prevent it through some directives issued by the Patriarchate recently.⁶³
- Local Christian and Muslim authorities, with the cooperation with UNITAD (The United Nations Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Da'esh/ISIL), adopted an Interfaith Statement on victims of ISIL, condemning the violence committed by ISIL as completely contrary to their respective faiths.⁶⁴

Lebanon

- The Primate of the Orthodox Church of Antioch, HB Patriarch John X of Antioch and All the East, received at the Patriarchal Headquarters in Balamand, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of National Defense Zeina Akar Adra, Energy and Water Minister Raymond El Ghajar and Minister of Public Works and Transport Michel Najjar. They presented to his beatitude the current state of affairs and challenges facing the government.⁶⁵

⁶¹ Jfra News, Feb 27, 2020, <http://www.jfranews.com.jo/post.php?id=259415>

⁶² Asia News, February 29, 2020, <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/-Card-Sako:-Msgr.-Rahho-and-the-Iraqi-martyrs,-a-Church-'written-in-blood'-49432.html>

⁶³ Albawabh News, March 6, 2020, <https://www.albawabhnews.com/3928212>

⁶⁴ Relief Web, March 9, 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/iraqi-religious-authorities-adopt-interfaith-statement-victims-isil-enar>

⁶⁵ NNA, March 11, 2020, <http://nna-leb.gov.lb/ar/show-news/466973/>



- HB Maronite Patriarch of Antioch and all the East, Cardinal Mar Bechara Boutros El-Rahi, received the United Nations Special Coordinator in Lebanon Ján Kubiš, who presented the general situation of Lebanon and the region, and the challenges that resulted from the Corona pandemic.⁶⁶
- With the help of the orthodox church in Cairo, HB Patriarch Youssef el Absi, The Patriarch of the Melkite Greek Catholic Church, received condolences over the passing away of his brother.⁶⁷

Palestine

- As per the recommendation of the Palestinian Health Ministry to close local churches, mosques and other institutions, The Nativity Church in Bethlehem, was temporarily closed due to the coronavirus outbreak.⁶⁸
- HE Atallah Hanna, Archbishop of Sebastia from the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem, in an interview with 'Dounya El Watan' claimed that the patriarchate stands with the prisoners in the occupation prisons and their families. He also demand all human rights institution to condemn the medical negligence practiced against the prisoners.⁶⁹
- HE Atallah Hanna, during a televised interview, claimed that the corona pandemic is man-made and that sooner or later the disease will die out.⁷⁰

Syria

- During March, HH Patriarch Mar Ignatius Aphrem II, Patriarch of Antioch and all the East of the Syriac Orthodox, presided over the Midday prayer at Mor Yacoub Baradeus Church in Mor Yacoub Baradeus Monastery in Atchaneh – Lebanon and met their Excellencies the Archbishops of Damascus: Armenian Orthodox Archbishop of Damascus Armash Nalbandian, Greek Orthodox Patriarchal Vicar Aphrem Maalouli, Greek Orthodox Patriarchal Assistant Moussa Al-Khoury, Greek Orthodox Patriarchal Assistant Youhanna Batch, Syriac Catholic Archbishop of Damascus Mar Youhanna Jihad Battah, Armenian Catholic Archbishop of Damascus Joseph Arnaouti, Rev. Fr. Raymond Gerges, General Vicar of the Latin

⁶⁶ Lebanon 24, March 17, 2020,

<https://www.lebanon24.com/news/lebanon/684611/%D9%83%D9%88%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%AA>

⁶⁷ Youm 7, March 5, 2020, <https://www.youm7.com/story/2020/3/5/>

⁶⁸ Roya News, March 5, 2020, <https://en.royanews.tv/news/20175/Nativity-Church-to-close-after-suspected-coronavirus-cases>

⁶⁹ Alwatan Voice, March 4, 2020, <https://www.alwatanvoice.com/arabic/news/2020/03/04/1319590.html>

⁷⁰ Sotal Iraq, March 17 2020, <http://www.sotaliraq.com/2020/03/17/>



Bishop in Damascus, at the Patriarchate Headquarters in Bab Touma, Damascus, following the regular meeting of the Bishops of Damascus. The patriarchate also issued a statement concerning the coronavirus outbreak and containing new regulations.⁷¹

- Jesuit Refugee Services (JRS) marked the 9th anniversary of the war in Syria by calling for the halt of hostilities and for protecting civilians.⁷²

Cyprus

- The Church of Cyprus has called on people to abstain from all masses for three weeks until 10 April to contain the spread of coronavirus.⁷³
- HB Chrysostomos, incumbent Archbishop of Cyprus, in a circular to the clergy, instructed priests to only allow 10 people at a time inside a church.⁷⁴

⁷¹ <https://syriacpatriarchate.org/>

⁷² Vatican News, March 16, 2020, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2020-03/jesuit-refugee-service-appeal-syria.html>

⁷³ Neoskosmos, March 16, 2020, <https://neoskosmos.com/en/160405/orthodox-church-of-cyprus-urges-believers-to-abstain-from-liturgies-and-holy-communion/>

⁷⁴ Cyprus Mail, March 17, 2020, <https://cyprus-mail.com/2020/03/17/coronavirus-church-to-allow-only-10-people-at-a-time-into-services/>



5. MECC HEADQUARTERS ACTIVITIES

MECC goes Digital (March 9)

The graphic is a blue rectangular box with a yellow triangle in the bottom right corner. At the top left is the MECC logo. To its right is the Arabic text 'مجلس كنائس الشرق الأوسط' and 'The Middle East Council of Churches'. Below this is the title 'Exceptional measures to limit the Coronavirus (COVID 19) outbreak at the Middle East Council of Churches' in yellow. The main text is in white, stating that due to the emergency situation, the council has decided to close its offices and dispensaries in Lebanon and Syria, and to cancel its activities, meetings, gatherings and humanitarian services from March 9 to 15, 2020. It also mentions that the General Secretariat has decided to cancel all travels until March 31, 2020, and that these decisions are subject to change. The text concludes with 'United in prayer, we ask God to overwhelm this world with His mercy!'.

MECC press release in Arabic, declaring the closing of its offices and dispensaries, March 9, Photo Credit: MECC Website.

As the covid-19 pandemic spreads worldwide, the MECC has the social responsibility of hindering its proliferation. Therefore, it had canceled its activities and closed down its offices and dispensaries in Lebanon and Syria, in an attempt to prevent public gatherings and meetings. It was initially planned that the MECC would be closed for the period March 9-15. Nevertheless, as the global, regional, and national situation dragged on, the council had to extend time frame to a date yet to be determined.

On the same note, the MECC General secretariat also canceled its visits and travels until March 31, 2020. Of course, this decision is subject to change depending on the circumstances.

As for the missionaries and employees of the council, they have transformed into an online workforce, which are still working from the confines of their homes. However, they bear a massive burden on their shoulders: to rekindle hope among Christians during these troubled times.



A Communique from the Middle East Council of Churches in the Season of Lent and times Coronavirus (March 19)



مجلس كنائس الشرق الأوسط

The Middle East Council of Churches

The Middle East Council of Churches logo

With the blessing of the Heads of the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC), in this Season of Lent and in the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic which threatens all of humanity, the MECC wishes to issue the following Communique to its member churches and all people of good will.

Fasting is a time of meditation, prayer, and conversion during which Christians repent and ask God and each other for forgiveness. The Church starts by asking forgiveness, in preparation for Easter, the crossing from darkness to light, from death to resurrection. The Church Fathers likened that journey to the People of God, the Church, crossing the desert into the Promised Land, the Land of the Covenant and into a new life with God, a journey in which they experienced hardships, difficulties, and temptations, while accepting God's Covenant, commandments, and salvation.

In the desert crossing, God revealed to His people the glow of His bright face and glory through patience, affection, and love. The forty-day fasting is about the old man accepting the gift of freedom in Christ's resurrection from the dead. Fasting helps humans consider their weaknesses and sins, repent to God and return to themselves and to their brothers and sisters. Fasting helps them see the radiant face of God reflected in the image of His Son hanging on the cross in his infinite love for humanity. Fasting is also the yearning of the faithful for the lights of the Resurrection and the newness of divine life in the Holy Spirit.

Brothers and sisters, the crossing of the desert in this year's Lenten Season is utterly bitter and thorny, because of wars, migration, displacement, tragedies, epidemics, spiritual alienation, the weakening of human values and more. However, we do not despair, we are



not dismayed, the Lord is with us. As the psalm says, our faces shall never be covered with shame, we seek the radiant face of Lord, we reach out to our brothers with love and strive to sanctify nature. The sense of responsibility before God requires from us to undertake an in-depth reflection into the meaning of fraternal solidarity among people and solidarity with nature, as a means of safeguarding the universe and its ecological balance, while struggling to redress the various processes and policies which resulted in the imbalance and disruption of the system. There is no point in fasting unless we empty ourselves in His image, “He who emptied himself taking the form of a slave, becoming as human beings are...he was humbler yet, and even to accepting death, death on the cross” (Philippians 2, 7-8), and unless we purify ourselves to overcome hardships, pain, and epidemics, and seek love, generosity, purity, and sacrifice.

Containment is imposed on us by the Corona epidemic, turning us into hostages in the desert of the fear of contamination and death. However, the Lord urges us “to keep our eyes fixed on him, who leads us in our faith and brings it to perfection: for the sake of the joy which lay ahead of him, he endured the cross, disregarding the shame of it, and has taken his seat at the right of God’s throne” (Hebrews 12, 2). The Lord walks with us and draws us towards him, the source of our strength and courage. This is an opportunity for rapprochement, reconciliation, support, and solidarity; an opportunity to help the needy, the sick and the displaced, an opportunity to test human fraternity in its divine depth, and to put ourselves into question while seeking to rediscover the meaning of our existence in the light of genuine spiritual and human values.

On behalf of all member churches, and with the blessing of our spiritual leaders, MECC is mobilizing its potentials while doubling efforts to carry out its spiritual and humanitarian duties in response to the current situation. Prayers will be held next Sunday, March 22, 2020 to raise a unified voice and supplications for those infected with Corona and their families, and for the medical staff and health workers who risk their lives to provide treatment and prevention, including public health officials, who, we hope, with God’s help, will be able to contain the spread of the virus and prevent potential grave social, economic and environmental consequences.

Next Sunday morning, we shall meet in deep prayer entrusting humanity and the universe “to the merciful Father and the God who gives every possible encouragement” (2 Corinthians 1, 3). All individuals and in various societies will hopefully recover their well-being, in an act of Christian and human solidarity derived from the heart of the Lord. We pray God Almighty to help us act in a spirit of responsibility, courage and sincerity in the service of people, so that the light of Christ who triumphed over evil and death, may radiate throughout our world.



COVID-19 gathered the General Secretaries of REOs in an online global meeting (March 19)



Logos: World Council of Churches and Middle East Council of Churches. Photo credit: MECC website

The worsening emergency situation stemming from the coronavirus outbreak has pushed the Regional Ecumenical Organizations (REO) to increase their efforts in order to help and rescue all communities around the world, while working together as a fellowship of churches.

Therefore, Dr. Souraya Bechealany, MECC General Secretary, has responded to the call of Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit, the World Council of Churches' General Secretary, for a Skype meeting, on March 20, 2020, that gathered all the REOs General Secretaries, to discuss how our churches are dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Accordingly, the REOs General Secretaries will issue a global statement to share the decisions taken during the meeting, concerning the novel coronavirus pandemic which threatens all humanity.



MECC facing Coronavirus, COVID-19 (March 25)



. Photo credit: MECC website

As the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC) believes that such difficult times strengthen the ecumenical spirit and spread hope and faith, it has decided to positively adapt to the situation imposed by the Coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak. Thus, it has set goals to achieve during this period along with clear deadlines, and conducts regular follow-ups to evaluate the progress made.

The MECC team is determined to continue working remotely and virtually -due to the enforced quarantine measures as all team members are working from home- and stay connected online on an unprecedented scale, through regular virtual meetings and video calls.



Even though it might not be easy - since the team is used to work daily in the same office, to have lunch together and solve problems by discussing issues on the spot - each team member is trying to do his/her part to make this work and overcome these hard times, through cooperation, solidarity and most importantly, prayer.

A Time for Pastoral, Prophetic and Practical Christianity: A Joint Statement from the World Council of Churches and Regional Ecumenical Organizations (March 26)



Logos: World Council of Churches, Middle East Council of Churches and the Regional Ecumenical Organizations. Photo credit: MECC website

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ...who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God.

(2 Cor. 1:3-4)



As representatives of Regional Ecumenical Organizations and the World Council of Churches, we share the challenges that our communities around the world are facing due to the coronavirus, COVID-19.

We urge people everywhere to give highest priority to addressing this situation and assisting in whatever ways we can in our collective efforts to protect life. This is a time to touch each other's hearts, by what we say, share, and do – and by what we are unable to do—to protect the life that God created out of love.

For the sake of that love, it is important and urgent that we adapt our modes of worship and fellowship to the needs of this time of pandemic infection, in order to avoid the risk of becoming sources of viral transmission rather than means of grace.

Our faith in the God of life compels us to protect life by doing all that we can to avoid transmitting this virus. Let us manifest God's unconditional love in safe, practical ways that protect life, alleviate suffering, and ensure that churches and public services do not become hubs of transmission of the virus.

Physical distancing does not mean spiritual isolation. This is an opportune time for the churches all over the world to review their role in society by safely ministering to, providing for, and caring for the poor, the sick, the marginalized, and the aged—all those who are most at risk due to COVID-19.

People in many parts of the world have become homebound these days. Being homebound does not mean that we cannot experience a deep spiritual solidarity with each other, by virtue of our baptism into the one body of Christ. We can pray at home. We can give thanks to God and pray for strength, healing, and courage. We can show our love for God and our neighbour by not gathering in person for public worship. Many congregations can share their worship gatherings online or digitally. Members and pastors can also stay in touch with each other and provide pastoral care by telephone.

The novel coronavirus pandemic has reached all the regions of our planet. There are fear and panic, pain and suffering, doubt and misinformation, about both the virus and our response as Christians. Yet as a global community of faith, we affirm that, even in the midst of our vulnerability, we trust in God as God is our hope.

Amid stories of suffering and tragedy, there are also stories of simple kindness and extravagant love, of solidarity and the sharing of hope and peace in innovative and surprising ways.

During this Lenten season, our pilgrimage takes us through the desert of hardships, difficulties, and temptations, from death to resurrection, into a new life with God.



This desert is made more hostile and fearful by COVID-19, but we are called to join our hearts in solidarity with each other, to mourn with those who mourn, to share peace with those who are anxious, and to restore hope through solidarity in faith.

That human solidarity is eroded and anxiety is heightened when we are in panic and concentrate on shopping and hoarding the basics. In so doing, we fail to be instruments of God's grace in this season.

We recognize the need for responsible leadership by the state, communities, and faith leaders alike. Governments at all levels must ensure access to correct and timely information, address the situations due to loss of livelihood and employment, especially to provide access to clean water and sanitizers and soap, to safe shelter, and to compassionate care for the most vulnerable, while aware that some of these remain challenges for many across the globe. This is also a time for profound reflection on the common good, good governance, and ethical values rooted in our traditions.

In the midst of this grave crisis, we lift up our prayers for those providing leadership and for governments around the world, urging them to give priority concern to those who live in poverty, as well as to the marginalized and refugees living in our midst.

As religious leaders, we raise our collective voices to highlight the necessity for greater attention to the needs of the homeless, the incarcerated, the elderly and those already suffering from social isolation. We remember, too, those people, especially women and children, who face abuse and violence, who are not safe at home and may suffer additional abuse and violence as stress increases.

Finally, let us continue to pray for those infected with COVID-19, for their families, and for the medical staff and health workers who risk their lives to provide treatment and prevention for us. And let us pray also for public health officials, who, we hope, will be able, with God's help and our cooperation, to contain the spread of the virus and prevent grave social, economic, and environmental consequences.

God's love is all-embracing, and the God of life is with each of us, even in our suffering.

26 March, 2020

Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit, General Secretary, World Council of Churches

Dr Souraya Bechealany, General Secretary, Middle East Council of Churches

Rev. James Bhagwan, General Secretary, Pacific Conference of Churches

Dr Mathews George Chunakara, General Secretary, Christian Conference of Asia

Gerard Granado - General Secretary, Caribbean Conference of Churches



Rev. Dr Fidon Mwombeki, General Secretary, All Africa Conference of Churches
Pastor Peter Noteboom, General Secretary, Canadian Council of Churches
Dr. Jørgen Skov Sørensen, General Secretary, Conference of European Churches
Jim Winkler, General Secretary, National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA

MECC Secretary General Dr Souraya Bechealany on Télé Lumière and NOURSAT: During the season of Lent, let our quarantine be like crossing with Jesus from death to Resurrection (March 27)



Dr Souraya Bechealany, the secretary general of the Middle East Council of Churches, guest of Father Nicolas Riachi on “Saa men wa’tak”, a show broadcasted on Télé Lumière and NOURSAT. Photo credit: MECC website



Dr Souraya Bechealany, the secretary general of the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC), was the guest of Father Nicolas Riachi on “Saa men wa’tak” which means in English “An Hour of Your Time”, a show broadcasted on Télé Lumière and NOURSAT. Bechealany clarified the position of the Middle East Council of Churches during these hard times due to the Coronavirus outbreak and highlighted the joint statement issued by the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the Secretaries General of Regional Ecumenical Organizations (REOs).

Dr Souraya Bechealany showcased the role that churches play nowadays in addressing believers to explain to them the true spiritual, Christian and ecclesiastical meaning of the current circumstances. She also recalled the MECC statement, issued on 19 March 2020, which provided a spiritual explanation of these challenging times by linking the Coronavirus outbreak to the season of Lent. In addition, Bechealany mentioned that MECC has participated in the drafting of the WCC and REOs statement that also gave a spiritual meaning to this difficult period. She stressed the importance of the statement that represents the voice of the Church emanating from the ecclesiastical authority to address believers through an honest and real approach based on theology and the Bible. She also took this opportunity to highlight that the Middle East Council of Churches’ statements are centered on theological and humanitarian fundamental principles and based on the decisions made by Church leaders.

MECC secretary general rejected the position of some priests and scholars that, based on a personal theological interpretation, considered that “Jesus’ grace protects us from the virus”. She insisted that Jesus Christ gave us wisdom and the ability of discernment, to always choose life, adding that the Church is a devoted mother that must always protect human life. Bechealany shed light on this deep theological concept that is fundamental to the life of the Church, explaining that “by respecting home quarantine in the name of Jesus, we will become means of grace that protect life rather than sources of viral transmission”. She emphasized that priority must be given to common good and moral values anchored in our Christian traditions, adding that everyone should abandon traditions that contradict with faith.

At the end of her statement, Bechealany sent a message to people asking them to turn this period to a period of grace, prayer, repentance and self-reflection while focusing on caring for the others. She urged organizations, dioceses and congregations to concentrate their efforts on serving people as “we need to cooperate all together to be at the service of the poor, marginalized and sick and most importantly pray to support medical staff and health workers who risk their lives to provide treatment for infected patients”.



DSPR report on Coronavirus (COVID-19) in the Middle East (March 25)



Corona Sufferers in the Areas (Status as of 24.03.2020)

- 1,656 persons affected in Israel
- 267 Persons affected in Lebanon
- 127 Persons affected in Jordan
- 57 Persons affected in the West Bank
- 2 Persons affected in Gaza

Total Cases/1 million population (Status as of 24.03.2020)

- 167 Cases in Israel
- 39 cases in Lebanon
- 12 cases in Jordan
- 12 cases in Palestine



In all the regions where DSPR/MECC works, there is total closure except for vital and necessary services to fight the virus. Measures are put in place to ensure responsiveness to those in need for groceries, medical attention other than infection, and procurement of medications. In Jordan there is a curfew that does not allow anyone to leave home. A system has been put in place to enable bread, water and medicaments to reach homes thus lowering the necessity for people to be out of their domiciles. In Palestine, the government is making sure that no one would travel from one area to another and all are expected to stay home. In Lebanon, the government has declared a medical emergency and ordered all to stay home. In Israel, stringent measures have been introduced that would minimize the movement of people out of their homes. Practically all of DSPR/MECC staff are working from home. DSPR Central Office staff started working from Home on Monday, March 16th. DSPR-NECC Gaza has closed all training centres; teachers are on annual paid leave, renewable every week. The DSPR-NECC health clinics in Gaza continue to operate under special hygiene regulations that are intended to minimize contact between the general clinics and clinics frequented by visitors for antenatal and well baby purposes. The main office in Gaza continues its operations with extra safety precautions taken. Citizens in Gaza are concerned that the virus will spread rapidly, due to the population density with 2 million Palestinians in the 212 square mile area.

In Lebanon, particularly because of the already very difficult economic situation, the coronavirus was first taken lightly and treated like a normal flu. In the centres of DSPR-JCC, people were asked not to kiss and not to hug. Disinfectant was used, but more jokingly than anyone worried. Due to the emergency all were ordered to work from home; our centres had to close; the Palestinian Civil Defence operating in the camps undertook to fumigate the streets and squares of each of the camps, including Dbayeh Refugee Camp which is some distance out of Beirut. With Syria closing its borders with Lebanon, as a containment measure, our Syrian students who are getting their lessons online may not be able to complete their exams, planned for Damascus. The worry, like in the other countries hit by the virus, is that those daily paid and temporary workers will lose their source of income. Many families will experience dire circumstances where there is no food on their tables. Already in Jordan and Palestine, thousands of families are found in this predicament and some NGOs, public and private agencies have started chipping in so that the minimal living requirements for these families are met. In Israel, DSPR-ICCI is also aware of the impact of the situation on Arab families, particularly the poor and the marginalized, throughout Galilee.

Full closure between Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory has been in place for some days now. Fifty thousand Palestinian laborers are actually staying for two months in Israel, based on commitment by their employees, mostly big companies in the construction sector, to provide them with living arrangements. Some media reports speak of the conditions for these workers that are below the minimum in terms of sleeping arrangements, hygiene and food preparation facilities. The Palestinian



laborers were allowed in, and even encouraged to stay in Israel not out of love but to avoid the collapse of the construction market in Israel.

DSPR/MECC is taking part in a global appeal that will be launched by Act Alliance. The worry, as mentioned above, are the families that would be left without cash for the minimum necessities. All governments in the region keep assuring the citizens that there are enough food supplies to go around. The question for us and for others is simply what about those hapless families that will find nothing on their tables to feed their children and to care for their basic necessities?

Partners worldwide had exchanged messages with each other. With our faith in the mercy of Our Lord and with the tireless efforts of medical, scientific and others working either to confront the virus head on or to develop a vaccine or medication that would check it, we are confident that we will overcome. Our friends and partners in Kerk in Actie Netherlands have shared with us the following prayer by the United Church of Canada.

God,

Help us to reach out with our hearts when we can't touch with our hands

Help us to be socially connected when we have to be socially distant

Help us to love as perfectly as we can know that "perfect love casts out all fear" (1 John 4: 18).



6. MECC Humanitarian activities March 2020

Syria

- Launched remedial classes for 550 students in Damascus rural and Aleppo.
- Launched rehabilitation of 4 public schools in Aleppo and Damascus rural.
- Prepared to pay the 2nd batch of tuition fees support for 100 students in Homs, Damascus and Damascus rural.
- Conducted refresher health awareness sessions for 60 women in Daraa, Aleppo and Damascus.
- Prepared to launch activities to distribute micro-gardening kits and basic irrigation system for 165 females in Daraa governorate.
- Completed the distribution of cattle fodder for 400 beneficiaries in Daraa governorate after providing them with technical training related to livestock farming.
- Completed the distribution of dairy processing kits and refrigerators for 60 processors and retailers in Daraa governorate.
- Completed the establishment of 8 veterinary clinics in Daraa governorate.



Rehabilitation of 4 public schools in Aleppo and Damascus Rural, March 2020, photo credit: Diakonia.



Refresher health awareness sessions for 60 women, March 2020, photo credit: Diakonia.



Distribution of cattle fodder for 400 beneficiaries in Daraa, March 2020, photo credit: MECC website.



Technical training related to livestock farming, March 2020, photo credit: MECC website.



7. CONCLUSION

While the infectivity rate of COVID-19 gradually increases, and more and more victims fall to this virus, some have declared that it is the beginning of the end of the human race. The MECC would like to remind that mankind had survived tens of deadly plagues and outbreaks; it is not the first time we face such a predicament. Also, with the presence of nowadays' technologies and hardworking scientists a cure will surely be on the way. Furthermore, the MECC would like to remind Christians, of our Lord Jesus Christ who is with us and who cured the blind, the paralyzed, those with leprosy. He also raised people from the dead. So "if God is for us, who can be against us". Romans 8:31