

## Lebanon health system understaffed: Abiad

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Director of the Rafic Hariri University Hospital, Firass Abiad speaks during an interview with AFP inside the coronavirus department in the capital Beirut on July 28, 2020. (AFP / ANWAR AMRO)

BEIRUT: Lebanon's health care system is "still holding" despite an increase in COVID-19 hospitalizations following the Aug. 4 port explosion, but staff shortages will limit its ability to absorb a surge in infections, the country's foremost coronavirus authority said Friday.

"The main bottle neck in expanding our capacity remains the health care workforce," the head of Rafik Hariri University Hospital Dr. Firass Abiad wrote on Twitter. "Several hospitals have the required equipment, such as ventilators, but lack the trained staff. Infections in staff further decrease their numbers."

At the time of writing, 810 health care workers had caught coronavirus in Lebanon since Feb. 21. A total of 26,768 people in Lebanon have so far been infected by the virus, which has claimed the life of 263 of them.

Abiad explained to The Daily Star that the need for trained nurses had risen as more people in Lebanon found the need to seek treatment for the disease at hospital and in intensive care units.

Health Ministry data shows that at the beginning of August there were 143 people in hospital for COVID-19 and a further 32 in intensive care.

By mid-September, the number of patients in hospital and intensive care had risen by 193 percent and 275 percent, respectively. On Sept. 16, there were 426 people occupying hospital beds and a further 120 in intensive care.

At the time of writing, there were 66 unoccupied intensive care beds available for COVID-19 patients and 252 unoccupied inpatient COVID-19 beds available.

“The need for intensive care beds has jumped up and the issue is not that we don’t have nurses, but that they have to be trained to work in ICU, and trained even more to work with Covid ICU,” Abiad said.

“This is where our need is at the moment, but at the same time a lot of nurses are understandably looking for jobs outside of the country because of the financial situation,” Abiad added.

He explained that RHUH was not among the worst hit by the shortage of nurses because the hospital administration had implemented an “incentive program” for them and offered them services such as mental health support.

“We have actually been able to expand our nursing staff, we have been recruiting. But that is RHUH. One hospital that I know of in the north has the equipment to open 10 beds but has only been able to open three beds because of a shortage of nurses,” Abiad said.

Lebanon’s financial crisis has seen the local currency lose around 80 percent of its value on the black market in under a year, making medical imports much more expensive. Private hospitals are also owed hundreds of millions of dollars from the government, limiting their ability to dedicate more beds to coronavirus patients.

These conditions have seen an estimated 40 percent of the country’s 9,000 nurses been laid off by health centers since November last year, the head of the Order of Nurses in Lebanon Dr. Myrna Doumit told The Daily Star. Hundreds more doctors and nurses have also emigrated from Lebanon in recent months, according to the head of the Lebanese Order of Physicians, Charaf Abou Charaf.

“In short, we are still within capacity, but Covid numbers continue to rise. Vigilance in following preventive measures is a must. A slow rise may give us time to prepare, an outbreak does not. Ventilators can be bought, health care workers cannot. Luck favors the prepared,” Abid wrote.

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