Kurdistan Region of Iraq embraces a major COVID 19 awareness campaign

Erbil, Iraq on 23 August 2020: The World Health Organization (WHO), in cooperation with the Ministry of Health in Kurdistan Region of Iraq, launch a major COVID 19 prevention and containment campaign in KRG-I.

The onset of the 9-day campaign on 23 August 2020 is from Suleimaniya which marked a severity in infection rates since the early stages of the outbreak due to multiple factors, mainly its proximity and long borders with neighboring Iran.

The campaign engages the local community through the mobilization of more than 250 local community volunteers to reach a population of over 800,000 people in 10 target areas including IDP and refugee camps in Arbat and Kalar districts.

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq, like the rest of the country and the world, was impacted by the COVID 19 pandemic which laid its heavyweight on the health care system and lifesaving services in the region which continues to host approximately 700,000 internally displaced population and over 220,000 Syrian refugees.

“The outbreak has challenged the health resources and capacity to accommodate the uncontrolled increase in the number of cases in almost all countries around the world,” said Dr. Adham R. Ismail Abdel Moneim, WHO Representative and Head of Mission in Iraq.

“WHO and the health authorities at the Federal level as well as in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq have been closely monitoring the proliferation of the outbreak in Iraq. As early as February this year, WHO has stepped up its response activities to support the federal and regional ministries of health with urgent medical supplies and equipment in addition to the implementation of consecutive awareness campaigns in many parts of the country to limit the spread of the disease and stop it from encroaching to slums and camps hosting IDPs and refugees,” he added.

The campaign covers several activities like the dissemination of audio messages through a selection of Kurdish radio waves and the deployment of mobile screens to display WHO educational videos and animation messages focusing on mask-wearing, social distancing, and hand hygiene. It also includes booths which were set at entries to local markets, main public places, and crowded streets to distribute awareness material like brochures, flyers, in addition to the campaign protection package which contains 3 masks, a campaign T-shirt, and a head cap to the pedestrians spotted around with no personal protection.

During the logistics preparations in the governorate, we met with people who shared many bitter stories on their experience with COVID19 disease. “Many have lost a family member, a friend, a neighbor, a loved one. Others have survived the disease after weeks of suffering from fever, malaise, cough, and difficulty breathing. It was such an experience that I do not wish anyone to go through it,” commented Ahmed
Sadruddin who lost a younger brother after a month of suffering in Shahid Aso Hospital in Suleimaniya District.

For Lana Rashad, the situation was a terrifying one. She was in her 5th month of pregnancy when she was tested positive for COVID-19. She got the virus from her sister who visited her one evening without knowing she was infected, Lana explained. The sister didn’t look well but she thought it was simple fatigue caused by housework. “Two days later, my sister and her husband were admitted to hospital for breathing assistance while I developed a severe headache, non-stop cough, sore throat and more that I surrendered to the thought I was going to die,” Lana added narrating how she felt more than a month ago.

In Mawlawi street, Sulaimnaiyah downtown, a family of 6 members just recovered after a 2-week hospitalization. “The hard time we’ve been through wouldn’t have happened If we had committed to the lockdown and social distancing,” said Sabah Mousa, a resident of the city. “The disease is a fact, not fake like others believe; it is dangerous and tough,” he added alerting all against contracting it to protect their elderly and loved ones.

More painful stories are still out there and could have been prevented with simple prevention measures like mask-wearing and social distancing as Dr. Sami Abdul Rahman highlights. “The population began to realize the seriousness of the infection. It is a reality that can be avoided by tending to hygiene practices, social distancing, and compulsory wearing of masks - which is what WHO is promoting through messages and awareness campaigns.”

WHO and the Ministry of Health in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq expect the campaign to succeed in raising the awareness of the Kurdish population on the importance of wearing a mask while outside the household or in gatherings, not to forget social distancing and good hand hygiene.

WHO continues to express its gratitude to the Government of Kuwait and the European Commission Humanitarian Office (ECHO) for their generous contribution to support the implementation of this campaign. Thanks is also extended to the local implementing partner the United Iraqi Medical Society (UIMS) NGO for their efforts to execute the campaign in KRG-I.

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