China's Guangdong steps up COVID-19 testing as infections mount

China's southern Guangdong province, spooked by a rise in novel coronavirus infections since May, stepped up mass testing this week in a handful of cities, including those that have yet to report a single case.

While the numbers of confirmed infections and asymptomatic cases remain small compared to massive outbreaks seen in other countries such as India and Brazil, China is taking no chances.

Guangdong, China's manufacturing hub and biggest province by economic output, has reported more than 110 confirmed cases since May 21. Its provincial capital Guangzhou has accounted for almost 90% of the confirmed cases, spurring the city of over 18 million people to ramp up mass testing.

Since starting the mass testing on May 26, Guangzhou has taken nearly 28 million nucleic acid samples, with 40 people showing positive for the coronavirus, a spokesperson of the city's health authority told reporters on Tuesday.

Many people have been tested multiple times.

A worker at Yantian port in Shenzhen, a city of more than 17 million people, tested positive after 11 previous tests from May 21 to June 1 came back negative. His village has since undergone five rounds of nucleic acid tests.

Guangzhou, Shenzhen and Foshan at different times have launched mass testing after reporting infections. Zhongshan and Jiangmen - two cities in Guangdong that have yet to report any cases - also initiated mass testing earlier this week as a precautionary step.

Singapore, since the weekend, has barred short-term visitors who have been to Guangdong within the last 21 days.

For June 7, China reported 33 new coronavirus cases on the mainland, up from 19 cases a day earlier, the health authority said on Tuesday.

Of the new cases, 19 were local transmissions from Guangdong, the National Health Commission said.

China also reported 16 new asymptomatic infections, compared with 21 a day earlier. China does not classify symptomless infections as confirmed cases.

By Monday, China had a total of 91,300 confirmed infections. Its death toll stood unchanged at 4,636.

reuters

Egypt's leadership emerges again in brokering Middle East stability

When Egypt helped to broker a May 21 ceasefire between Israel and Hamas after 11 days of fighting, ending a largely pointless conflict that pitted Hamas and its massive missile arsenal against Israel's air force, Cairo renewed its tradition of trying to reduce tensions between Israel and the Gaza Strip. This time, however, Egypt publicly went beyond its previous work and, on May 30, hosted Israel's foreign minister in Cairo for the first time in 13 years. It appears to be part of a slow but consistent shift for Egypt as it tries to resume a leadership role in the Middle East.

The symbolic visit by Gabi Ashkenazi, the Israeli minister, for meetings with his counterpart, Sameh Shoukry, came as Israel builds ties with new peace partners in the Gulf and Egypt expands its contacts and outreach to countries in the Horn of Africa. While Ashkenazi was in Cairo, the Egyptians sent their intelligence chief, Abbas Kamel, to meet with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Though Israel has had relations with Egypt for decades — Egypt was the first Arab country to sign a peace agreement with Israel in 1979 — for most of that time, those relations have run cold. Often, there are no public diplomatic visits and Israel's ambassador sometimes has not even been based in Egypt because of tensions.

Egypt's outreach now is part of a wider agenda by Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. Almost a decade after the "Arab Spring" led to the toppling of Egyptian leader Hosni Mubarak, Egypt is signaling its tentative steps back to regional leadership. From the 1950s to 1990s, Egypt was a major Arab country exporting culture, military power and leadership. That changed with the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011, as Cairo became more inward-looking, with protests and the temporary rise of the Muslim Brotherhood. Sisi came to power to remove the Brotherhood, but he has spent the past decade slowly rebuilding the country's clout.

That clout begins in north and east Africa. At the end of May, Egypt sent planes with humanitarian aid to Djibouti, and Sisi went to Djibouti for diplomatic talks.

Though a small country, Djibouti is host to strategic bases for Western powers and plays a big role in security in the Horn of Africa. After Djibouti, Egypt concluded military drills with Sudan. Egypt and Kenya have signed a new technical agreement on defense cooperation. Egypt's chief of staff of the armed forces, Mohamed Farid, has visited Kenya and Rwanda. Egypt also has conducted training with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Pakistan, and sent an aid convoy to Gaza.

Egypt's outreach to African states is not just about exporting influence and military or security ties.

Egypt is also concerned about an Ethiopian dam project.

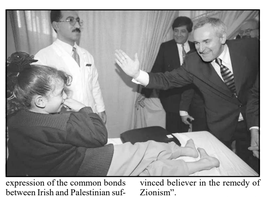
The U.S. has a special envoy to the Horn of Africa, Jeffrey Feltman, who recently went to Khartoum for talks about the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam. Egypt and Sudan are worried the dam may affect their water supplies from the Nile.

Additionally, Egypt has played a role in Libya, concerned about terror and extremism from the country in the midst of a civil war. Egypt has had tense relations with Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean, leading to greater partnership between Egypt, Greece, Cyprus and Israel. Perhaps most importantly, Egypt has reached out to the Syrian government and Egypt's foreign minister has called for Syria to return to the Arab League, 10 years after its suspension because of the Syrian civil war.

The overall picture shows Egypt beginning to step back into the leadership role it once held in the Middle East. It is seeking to create stability from Libya to Syria, and in Gaza — currently three main centers of conflict in the region. If Egypt can help reduce tensions in these areas, it will have succeeded where many have failed in the past decade.

thehill

What's behind Ireland's support for Palestine?



After Abraham Aljamal Phelan moved to Dublin in the late 1980s, many customers at his grocery store, where the shelves were adorned with fresh figs and olives, were up to date with the latest news from his native Palestine.

During their exchanges about food, culture and history, his stories of home found sympathetic ears.

"They relate to what's going on, for what we are going through, they relate to it in Ireland because of their history," he told Al Jazeera.

Dublin may lie 4,000km (2,485 miles) from Jerusalem on the map, but in the Irish political imagination, Palestine feels much closer, with both perceived as sharing a history of struggle against colonialism and oppression.

Ireland's Parliament voted unanimously last week to condemn Israel's "de facto annexation" of Palestinian land in the occupied territories – the first European Union member state to do so.

The following day, the Irish flag was hoisted above Ramallah's city hall, a video of which spread quickly on social media, shared by many of Aljamal Phelan's loved ones in Jerusalem.

Coming soon after the worst outbreak of Israel-Hamas violence in years, in which at least 254 Palestinians in Gaza and 12 people in Israel were killed, it was a welcome sight to many.

"I think the Palestinians are delighted, absolutely delighted to see a friend like Ireland, somebody standing by them," he said. "Because we are left out to dry by the whole world. Everybody is ignoring us."

From the hillside village of Beit Surik, just north of Jerusalem, his family have witnessed first-hand how Israel has deepened its control over the occupied territories.

His elder brother was shot dead at 17 by the Israeli army while walking with his family during the 1967 war, and much of the family land has since been taken for settlement and its water source diverted.

Today a border wall ruled illegal by the International Court of Justice separates his family from their olive groves.

Another brother has been shot at by Israeli settlers and his nephew, who suffers from leukaemia, has faced gruelling delays at army checkpoints to visit a nearby hospital for treatment.

John Boyne, foreign affairs speaker for the opposition, left-wing Sinn Fein party, who tabled the recent motion, told Al Jazeera that the move was a direct consequence of Israel's actions and an expression of the common bonds between Irish and Palestinian sufferings.

Sinn Fein supports the Boycott, Divest and Sanctions (BDS) movement, as well as expelling the Israeli ambassador, which the governing, conservative Fianna Fail and centre-right Fine Gael parties oppose.

"The time has gone for words of condemnation. Now is the time to take decisive action against a lawbreaker that presides over an apartheid system," he said.

'Deep understanding for what it means to be Palestinian'

The Irish Parliament captured international attention in 2018 when it passed the Occupied Territories Bill, which would have banned all goods and services originating in illegal settlements in the West Bank.

Though it had broad support across political parties and the general public, it was shot down during coalition negotiations between the two governing conservative parties.

For Amir Abualroh, a theatre artist, actor and LGBTQ activist, who came to Ireland from the West Bank town of Jenin three years ago, identification with the Palestinian cause has deep roots in Irish society.

"I see flags everywhere I go of my country, and I'm so proud walking in Ireland because I'm Palestinian, wherein another place it would be something else," he told Al Jazeera.

"[There is] this huge and deep understanding for what it means to be Palestinian, and what it means to live under occupation and colonisation."

In the late 19th and early 20th century, the picture was very different.

Irish republicans found common cause with Zionists, recognising each other as fellow persecuted and dispossessed peoples.

Returning from Russia on a trip to investigate a deadly pogrom in Kishinev, Irish republican leader Michael Davitt proclaimed in 1906 he was "a convinced believer in the remedy of Zionism".

Decades later, during their fight against British rule in Mandatory Palestine, Zionist paramilitary and armed groups such as the Irgun and Lehi closely studied the guerrilla tactics used during the Irish war of independence.

Yitzhak Shamir, the Lehi leader who went on to become Israeli prime minister, was nicknamed Michael, after Irish independence leader Michael Collins.

But Irish sympathy ran dry when the Zionists accepted the 1937 British plan to partition Palestine and create a Jewish state.

At the League of Nations, Prime Minister Eamonn De Valera denounced the carve-up as cruel and unjust, a bitter repetition of Ireland's own division by the British 15 years earlier.

"Irish political opinion saw the evolution of its attitude towards Zionism very much through the prism of the British. If the Zionists and the British are on the same side of partition then, 'We can't support the Zionists'," said Rory Miller, professor of government at Georgetown University in Qatar.

There was still considerable support for Israel in Ireland by the time of the 1967 war, but growing awareness of the fate of Palestinian refugees, alongside the work of Irish charities, and civil rights groups in Palestine, began to shift public opinion.

"Organised, mobilised activism on behalf of the Palestinians is absolutely – relative in per capita terms – higher in Ireland than it is in Britain or Germany, or many, many EU countries," said Miller.

Israel's conduct during the Lebanese Civil War, where 30,000 Irish soldiers served as peacekeepers, soured attitudes even more.

The deaths of a number of Irish soldiers at the hands of Israel and its proxy forces were among the reasons Dublin did not open an Israeli embassy until 1993.

Aljazeera

Kick-starting a new strategic and ...

From P6

Bangladesh has a large, professional and well-funded military. Although it has a democratic civilian-led government, the armed forces play a prominent role in public affairs. Good relationships across the Bangladeshi military are not only essential for defence cooperation, but are also a valuable element in broader political engagement. Current arrangements for servicing the relationship through Australia's defence adviser in Colombo are far from optimal. Australia needs a defence representative on the ground to have credibility, fully engage with the Bangladeshi military and explore further opportunities. This should include opportunities as a potential supplier in niche defence technologies or surplus equipment in light of Bangladesh's military modernisation program. A resident defence adviser would also improve Australia's visibility of security developments in the region.

Australia has long used military education to develop relationships with regional partners. We should provide opportunities (including on a paid basis) for senior Bangladeshi officers at the Australian War College, the National Security College or the Australian National Centre for Ocean Resources and Security. Networks could also be developed through targeted exchanges of personnel, for example, between the Bangladeshi and Australian peacekeeping training centres.

A port visit by one or more Australian naval ships could be undertaken as part of a future Indo-Pacific Endeavour activity in the northeast Indian Ocean.

Australia should undertake targeted capability-building activities with Bangladesh on selected maritime security issues where Australia has direct interests. These should focus on playing to Australia's strengths in experience and expertise, in areas such as maritime domain awareness, search and rescue, and port security, where Australia can provide valuable expertise and training.

Bangladesh's assumption of chair of the Indian Ocean Rim Association in 2021 provides an opportunity to collaborate on regional initiatives in maritime safety and security, the blue economy and environmental security. BIMSTEC, the regional political grouping in the northeast Indian Ocean, could also be a useful vehicle to demonstrate Australia's renewed interest in the region.

India is without doubt Australia's most important partner in South Asia and has been one of Australia's key foreign policy focuses for some years. But India's smaller neighbours also have important roles to play as we consider opportunities and risks in the region. An improved relationship with Bangladesh can provide valuable heft to regional relationships and additional options for Australia. aspistrategist