

Iraq sees record COVID-19 cases as new lockdown begins

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New lockdown measures came into effect in Iraq on Friday as it recorded its highest new coronavirus caseload in 2021—double the daily figures from less than a week ago.

Earlier this week, [health authorities](#) announced new overnight curfews would begin on February 18th, from 8:00 pm until 5:00 am, as well as full lockdowns on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays.

On its first full lockdown day on Friday, Baghdad's main roads were clear of the usual traffic and security forces had set up new checkpoints to stop violators.

Pharmacies remained open and restaurants were allowed to provide delivery service only, but all other businesses were ordered shut.

On Thursday evening, AFP correspondents saw customers lining up outside pharmacies and supermarkets to buy [face masks](#) as the new measures included a fine of 25,000 Iraqi dinars (\$17) for anyone not wearing one.

The sudden demand sent prices soaring from 2,500 IQD (less than \$2) to 6,000 IQD for a box of 50 medical masks.

Iraq has been among the countries hardest-hit by [coronavirus](#) in the Middle East, with more than 660,000 reported cases and over 13,200 deaths.

On Friday, Iraq recorded 4,024 new coronavirus cases compared to just 2,190 on February 13, for a population of 40 million people total, while deaths have remained relatively low at 12 per day.

After peaking in September at around 5,000 new cases per day, there had been a remarkable drop with around 800 new cases a day in December.

Encouraged by the low numbers, few wore masks in public or practised social distancing measures, which the [health ministry](#) said subsequently contributed to a new wave.

It has also blamed the new "UK strain," which emerged in southern England in December and is thought to be more contagious than others.

The ministry has doubled its testing to nearly 49,000 tests per day compared to around 25,000 in the autumn.

Health Ministry spokesman Seif al-Badr said Friday that most of the new infections were in western Baghdad, as well as the two shrine cities of Najaf and Karbala.

Among Najaf's cases is 91-year-old Grand Ayatollah Mohammad al-Fayyad, one of the top four Shiite clerics in the country led by Grand

Ayatollah Ali Sistani.

His office confirmed that he tested positive but said his condition was stable.

Badr also told AFP that a first batch of three million doses of vaccines was due to arrive "in the coming days".

"We have ordered three million, up to 3.5 million, vaccines from AstraZeneca, Sinopharm, as well as Pfizer," he said.

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