

Situation Update from the Latin Patriarchate – July 2020

Effects of Covid-19

The last few months has been one of the most difficult periods as a result of Covid-19, mostly due to the mysterious nature of the virus and the so many unknowns surrounding its spread. Science that was supposed to provide some answers and clarity seems to provide confused and at times contradictory messages which only made the situation worse. Thus, the past period witnessed many changes that were necessary, and in many instances, flexibility was an absolute must. In the following paragraphs, I will try to provide an update on the major events since the beginning of the pandemic affecting the day to day life at the LPJ.

General Situation

The general health situation seemed to be under control until about two weeks ago when there was a major increase in the cases in both Israel and Palestine, while the situation is relatively controlled in Jordan. Most all easing of the restrictions have been cancelled and there is almost a complete reversal leading to localized lockdowns in areas where the spread is greatest. In Israel, the number of cases now is almost 31,000 cases and increasing by several hundred on a daily basis and the number of deaths stands at close to 340 with a sharp increase in the cases that require hospitalization. In Palestine, after an early and swift response at the beginning, the cases now stand at close to 4,500 with an increase in the hundreds on a daily basis and a relatively very low death rate at 17. The Palestinian Authority just renewed the emergency orders for another thirty days through 5 August. In Jordan, they have been able to control the situation more tightly and the number of cases stands at 1,180 with a very limited number of new cases and the deaths at 10. In all three countries, land borders as well as airports remain closed with a minimal number of flights mostly to transport returning citizens.

In the early days of the pandemic and during the total lockdown and curfew conditions that were imposed, we are able to work through a skeletal staff reporting to work and many working from home whenever possible. As the restrictions were eased, we gradually returned to more normal working conditions with most staff reporting to their locations. Needless to say, most staff returned to a different work environment where all health regulations of measuring temperatures, social distancing, and mask usage became the new norm. Even with all those measures, an early relaxation on use of public transportation, opening of schools, restaurants, gyms, and allowing wedding halls to function at a capacity of 250 people at a time was certainly bad news and contributed to the more strict measures being reimposed now including closure of such facilities, limiting use of public transportation, and requesting 30% of the workforce to work from home... again! Luckily with a strong IT support and most operations utilizing online banking, we were able to function, certainly at less than ideal circumstances and we shall be able to do it again. We are forced to continue to adjust and be flexible as we move forward into an era of further unknowns.

As for the unemployment rates, Israel has seen an improvement since the early days as it was the first to restart the economy and allow more normal activities, including school re-

openings. It is reported that the unemployment rate dropped from the high of 27% to around 20% now. However, the generous unemployment benefits offered by the government will come to an end in mid-August which will leave hundreds of thousands without much governmental support. In both Palestine and Jordan, the economies there are too weak to be able to offer any meaningful stimulus packages. Unemployment rates in both countries remain very high hovering around the 40-45% by a number of unofficial reports.

Schools Update

The scenario played out at the 43 schools of the Latin Patriarchate (5 in Israel, 25 in Jordan, and 13 in Palestine) followed a mixed pattern, but all finishing the school year with some combination of operating modes. In Palestine and Jordan, the respective Ministry of Education encouraged following an online mode and eventually closed the school year online towards the end of May without a return to school. Israel however seemed a bit more confused with a strong labor union that eventually did not accept the full mobilization of online education and demanded a return to school to finish the school year. The issue was eventually resolved after the matter was referred to the courts who ordered a return to classes and closing the school year on time without any extension. It is worthy to note that the return to school in Israel did not go very well as initially most parents were reluctant to send their children back to school and eventually when larger numbers started showing up, there were many cases detected. In one day in early June, 180 schools were shut down for the discovery of cases and over 4,000 people ordered in quarantine in a span of four hours!

As for any meaningful summer activities, despite the fact that many children were in need of summer camps and various activities, very few felt that the conditions were ripe to hold such large group activities given that the risks were too high, and thus there was a decision not to hold any large group summer camps and to revert this year to smaller activities following all ministry of health regulations of hygiene and social distancing.

As for the beginning of the new school year, despite the many good will plans and efforts, the situation is far from clear on how to commence the new school year in the Fall. Palestine and Jordan announced that they will resume classes in early August with the first month to be dedicated to review the previous year syllabus, to be followed in early September with the new school year. Israel on the other hand seems planning to return to in-class education in the Fall. In all instances, administrators and teachers at all levels are studying various scenarios for next year including the possibility of online and in-class combinations that will reduce the class size and physical presence in confined spaces. In all instances, it is too soon to make concrete decisions as the health situation continues to be a moving target for the time being.

One important element that is being considered now is to address the shortfalls that were identified as a result of the abrupt switch from in-class to on-line education without much planning or preparation. Issues including capacity building, software development, and hardware issues as well as internet infrastructure are being discussed and addressed in order to enhance the on-line experience.

Financial Considerations

As was widely shared at the beginning of the pandemic, the major loss of jobs meant that many families will not be able to settle their tuition fees at our various schools who historically witness the largest tuition collection during the months of March, April, and May. This period coincided with the beginning of the pandemic, and thus the lack of tuition collection resulted in an operational deficit in the Palestine and Jordan schools in excess of seven million US dollars. Thus, an emergency was declared, and an emergency committee was set up to plan how to improve the income and reduce expenses. The emergency committee met once a week to review income and expenses trends, government mandated regulations, cashflow issues at all LPJ entities and staffing levels. As a result, the following moves were adopted:

- Discussions with the Governor General and through him with the Grand Master; Grand Magisterium and various Lieutenants lead to the Grand Master launching a Covid-19 humanitarian appeal in support of the LPJ.
- An appeal was launched with various Catholic Diocese and Catholic charities around the world.
- An appeal was launched with the priests, whereby the vast majority of them donated a portion (or in some cases all) of their monthly living subsidy towards the school fund.
- During the month of June, all administrative staff of the LPJ amounting to about 150 employees donated 20% of their salary towards the school's fund.
- Most operating expenses were monitored and reduced since the beginning of the pandemic.
- Requested school principals and accountants at all schools to encourage parents who were not affected by Covid-19 to settle their outstanding balances.

These measures will allow the LPJ to meet its financial obligations towards its 1,850 employees and about 150 religious till the end of the fiscal and academic year in August. Since it is anticipated that the pandemic will carry forward into the next year, the schools in Jordan and Palestine (where the major shortfall is) were requested to present short term rationalization plans with cost-cutting measures that can be considered in the short term, as well as longer term strategic plans possibly for the next 3-5 years that will include greater measures in order to better position the LPJ schools in the areas where they serve. It is expected that such plans will be presented for decisions and action soon.

Given the shortfall in the cashflow that resulted from the lack of tuition collections, some measures had to be taken in the last few months including the following:

- During the month of April, only 50% salaries were paid to all 508 teachers and staff at the 13 schools in Palestine with a promise to pay the balance when cash becomes available.
- During the month of May, only 75% salaries were paid to all 1,390 teacher and staff at the schools of Jordan and Palestine with a promise to pay the balance when cash becomes available.
- During the month of June, deducted 20% of the salaries of all 150 administrative staff. This amount will not be refunded.
- Delay the increase in salaries promised to the teachers in Jordan that was supposed to take effect in September 2020 until further evaluation takes place with the Grand Magisterium.

- During the month of July and given summer vacations the staff of the following entities will donate 20% of their salaries including Beit Jala Seminary; Christ the King Bookstore; and Our Lady of Peace Center. This will affect some 60 staff.

The situation will be monitored continuously by the emergency committee who make monthly recommendations to the Apostolic Administrator and the Consultors Council on a monthly basis. The coming weeks will be critical to determine if more drastic measures are needed in the coming months, especially after evaluating the tuition collection; appeal results; and cost cutting measures.

Humanitarian Support

As was expected and with the sharp increase in the unemployment rates and lack of governmental support mostly in Jordan and Palestine, there was a sharp increase in the requests received for humanitarian support. As agreed with the Order, the Covid-19 appeal will be utilized in two tracks. The first would be to support families in desperate need to put food on the table; buy hygiene supplies; provide children supplies including milk and diapers; buy medicines; or pay utilities bills including recharging electric meter cards. Thus, parish priests submitted their lists of needs based on a survey of parish members, especially those who lost their jobs and are most affected by the pandemic. The majority of the lieutenancies were very generous and already sent in special donations for humanitarian support related to Covid-19. So far close to 20 parishes in Jordan and Palestine were assisted with aid reaching over 800 households benefitting thousands.

The second track of the humanitarian funds will be utilized to support needy families who lost their employment meet their financial obligations towards the tuition of their children studying at LPJ schools. This scheme has not started yet as we are trying to exhaust all possibilities to collect tuition first before allocating funds. It is expected that thousands of families will be assisted with this fund, which will support the schools budget and allow us to meet our own financial obligations through continued employment of the 1,390 (mostly Christian) teachers and staff in the Jordan and Palestine schools.

Projects Administration

As for the implementation of the projects, by mid-March and with the closures and lockdowns, all project works came to a standstill. As the lockdowns eased, around 12 projects are now being prepared at various stages. Some have already been through a bidding process and the contracts awarded and works started, while others are in the planning and preparation mode with the bids to be solicited soon. As for the Jubeiha Church construction, despite the curfew and lockdown conditions, we were able to secure a special permit in Jordan to resume works, and indeed the works resumed in early June. It is now hoped (though I should be very careful with this assessment!) that the Church maybe completed by the end of September, Inshallah!

Gratitude

This is the first time in recent history where the suffering in other parts of the world was greater than it was in the Holy Land. If one considers the number of cases and deaths in the United States or Brazil today, and the large number of deaths in a number of European countries in the early part of the pandemic, not to mention the economic conditions and

high unemployment rates around the globe, we truly feel blessed here in the Holy Land. The incredible show of concern, prayers and financial support granted to your brothers and sisters has been a great breath of fresh air amidst all the negativeness and difficulties that have characterized the world since the pandemic started. We are truly blessed to have the Order of the Holy Sepulcher of Jerusalem behind us. A big thank you to the Grand Master His Eminence Cardinal Filoni; the Governor General His Excellency Leonardo Visconti; the Members of the Grand Magisterium; Members of the Holy Land Commission; Lieutenants; and all members for their generosity. Though the future is still so unclear, we are confident that with your support, we will be able to continue to fulfill our mission in pastoral care, educational services and humanitarian assistance and continue to do the best we can to support our Christian communities in the Holy Land.

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7 July 2020