

Prayers begin in Masjid-e-Nabvi, Al-Aqsa mosque

ISLAMABAD: Mask-clad worshippers flocked to Saudi mosques that reopened nationwide on Sunday, except in the holy city of Makkah, more than twomonths after congregational prayers were halted under a coronavirus-triggered lockdown.

Complying with stringent social distancing rules, worshippers kept a minimum of two metres apart as many voiced elation over the government decision to allow more than 90,000 mosques across the kingdom to re-open.

They had been instructed to bring their own prayer mats and to perform the cleansing ritual, or ablution, at home, instead of in mosque grounds. The Saudi government also reopened Masjid-e-Nabvi (SAW) for public on Sunday.

The Faithful offered Fajr prayer in the mosque with strict compliance of the precautionary measures to prevent the spread of coronavirus. Strict precautionary measures including limiting the congregation to 40 percent of the mosque's capacity at a time are being observed.

Elsewhere in Jerusalem, Al-Aqsa Mosque compound has reopened to worshippers and visitors after more than two months of closure due to the coronavirus pandemic. "Worshippers rushed to the home of God to perform their obligatory duty (prayers) after the reopening of mosques," the Saudi ministry of Islamic affairs said on Twitter.

The ministry posted a video showing a mosque with many worshippers wearing face masks and reaching out for a large bottle of hand sanitiser after prayers. Hundreds of people headed to Riyadh's Al-Rajhi mosque, where they had their temperatures checked before entering.

Multiple television screens inside the mosque displayed written instructions, including the need to maintain distance between the worshippers to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Authorities have instructed mosques to avoid crowding and the distribution of food, drinks, incense and miswak twigs used to clean teeth, according to the ministry.

"My feelings are indescribable. We are so happy. Thank God we are back in (His) house," Abdulrahman, said at Al-Rajhi mosque. "All the precautionary measures have been put in place here." But some took to social media to complain that worshippers in other mosques were not strictly complying with the rules.

"I prayed, praise be to God, in the neighbourhood mosque... and it was a beautiful feeling," said one Twitter user. "But I swear to God that some people do not care about anything. No face mask. No rug."

Saudi Arabia, home to Islam's holiest sites, had shut down mosques nationwide for more than two months to limit the spread of the virus. The kingdom, which has reported the highest number of coronavirus cases in the Gulf, is emerging from a full nationwide curfew imposed during Eidul Fitr. Domestic air traffic also resumed on Sunday, with state media saying around 100 flights were scheduled.

The interior ministry intends to ease restrictions in a phased manner, with the curfew lifted nationwide -- except in Makkah -- between 6:00am and 8:00pm (03:00 GMT and 17:00 GMT) until June 20.

The kingdom will lift the lockdown entirely from June 21, Makkah aside. In Makkah, a virus hotspot, the curfew will be lifted between 6:00am and 3:00pm until June 20, and thereafter the curfew will be shortened by a further five hours.

Saudi Arabia has reported more than 85,000 coronavirus infections and over 500 deaths from COVID-19.

In March, it suspended the year-round "Umrah" pilgrimage over fears of the disease spreading in the holy cities of Makkah and Madina.

That suspension will remain in place until further notice, the interior ministry said. Authorities are yet to announce whether they will proceed with this year's Haj -- scheduled for late July -- but they have urged Muslims to temporarily defer preparations for the annual pilgrimage.

Last year, some 2.5 million faithful travelled to Saudi Arabia from around the world to participate in the Haj, which Muslims are obliged to perform at least once during their lifetime.

Makkah's Grand Mosque has been almost devoid of worshippers since March, with an eerie emptiness surrounding the sacred Kaaba. But mosque employees and security personnel have been allowed to attend prayers.

Meanwhile, Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa Mosque compound reopened to worshippers and visitors after more than two months of closure due to the coronavirus pandemic. The Council of Islamic Waqf, which oversees Muslim sites on the complex, cited the virus's slowed local spread in lifting entry restrictions on Sunday.

But the Jordan-appointed council also imposed some precautionary measures to reduce the risk of contagion at Islam's third-holiest site. Worshippers must wear face masks and bring personal prayer rugs should they wish to pray in the mosque or on the grounds.

Chanting "God is greatest, we will protect Al-Aqsa with our soul and blood", tens of Muslims gathered in front of the large wooden doors, where they were welcomed by mosque director Omar al-Kiswani, who thanked them for their patience.

"After they opened the mosque, I feel like I can breathe again. Thanks be to God," Jerusalem resident Umm Hisham said through a face mask, her eyes tearing up, after entering the compound for dawn prayers.

The resumption of prayers capped a sombre period for Jerusalem's Muslims, who this year marked Ramazan and the Eid holiday without their usual daily visits to Al-Aqsa Mosque and the adjoining Dome of the Rock. The Al-Aqsa Mosque compound had closed its doors in March as part of measures to limit the spread of COVID-19, the highly infectious respiratory disease caused by the new coronavirus.