

Palestinians may limit Christmas celebrations in Bethlehem



The Palestinian Health Ministry has recommended strict limits on Christmas celebrations in Bethlehem this year due to the coronavirus outbreak.

Celebrations in the biblical town revered by Christians as Jesus' birthplace are usually attended by thousands of people from around the world.

But this year, the ministry has recommended the upcoming Christmas tree lighting ceremony in Manger Square be limited to 50 people, with the lights of the tree and area restaurants closed at 9 pm throughout the Christmas season.

In its recommendations, it said religious services on Christmas Eve should also have limited attendance.

Bethlehem's economy, filled with hotels, gift shops and restaurants, relies heavily on the Christmas season.

The cancellation or scaling back of the celebrations will deal another blow to an economy that already has been hit hard by the coronavirus crisis this year.

Palestinian officials are expected to make a final decision on Christmas celebrations in the coming days.

Israel's international airport – the main entry point for foreign travellers – has been closed to tourists for months, limiting the potential numbers of pilgrims in any case.

The West Bank is in the midst of a spike in coronavirus cases, while Israel is only slowly emerging from a lockdown imposed in September to control a raging outbreak.

The northern Israeli town of Nazareth, revered by Christians as the place of Jesus' childhood, has been designated a "restricted" zone by authorities, limiting movement in and out of the area for at least the next few days.

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