

Tunisia workers isolate in factory making anti-virus gear

26 March 2020

In Tunisia, 150 people—mostly women—have isolated themselves in a factory for a month to make protective gear like masks to help their country's fight against coronavirus.

Due to strict measures to prevent COVID-19 contamination, journalists are not allowed to visit the Consomed factory where 110 women and 40 men—including a doctor, cooks and the director—are working, eating and sleeping.

"We are the only ones producing (protective items) for Tunisian hospitals," director Hamza Alouini told AFP via video call.

"I chose to isolate (the company) as a precaution because if the virus gets into the factory, it will be disastrous."

The 5,000-square-meter (53,800-square-foot) facility, located in a largely [rural area](#) south of the capital Tunis, is the country's main production site for masks, caps, sterile suits and other protective items.

It is overwhelmed with demand, Alouini said, and struggling to supply hospitals.

All deliveries go through a decontamination process, he added.

Tunisian media has reported that several [health facilities](#) have had to stop services or quarantine staff after they came into contact with COVID-19 patients unprotected.

The Tunisian authorities have recorded 173 cases of the novel [coronavirus](#) since the start of March, including five deaths.

"We help each other," employee Khaoula told AFP via video call.

"When somebody is feeling down, we all try to

cheer them up."

The company published a video on [social media](#) showing workers with suitcases entering the factory on March 20 after having their temperatures checked.

Other workers had decided not to go into isolation due to [family responsibilities](#) or other commitments.

"My husband and my daughter are the first to support me. We are all motivated," Khaoula said.

The working day starts with the national anthem, she added, saying it "makes us feel like we are soldiers" in the service of healthcare workers.

They work eight hours a day and many opt to do paid overtime, according to Alouini.

Women and men sleep in separate dormitories and there is a space to play football, cards and relax, he said.

But, he added, the factory will only be able to carry on like this for a month.

The company sells masks to a public body at long-established prices and won't have the funds to continue the costly operation.

Plus, isolation could start to weigh on staff morale, Alouini said.

"We won't be able to do more."

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APA citation: Tunisia workers isolate in factory making anti-virus gear (2020, March 26) retrieved 12 July 2022 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-03-tunisia-workers-isolate-factory-anti-virus.html>

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