

Bracing for 2nd virus wave, Israel aims to end imports by making its own masks

Government has requested local supplier to produce 40 million regular sanitary masks and 11 million N95 models; 'total independence' expected in 2-3 weeks

By **MICHAEL BLUM**

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A worker at the Sion Medical factory, the country's first production line of N95 masks, produces a mask at the factory in the southern city of Sderot, on June 15, 2020. (MENAHEM KAHANA/AFP)

AP — White medical masks slide along a production line in southern Israel, as the country seeks to end its reliance on imports and ready for a potential spike in coronavirus cases.

At an industrial park in Sderot, a city abutting the Gaza Strip, factory staff this week started producing the first of millions of high-spec N95 masks.

Sion Medical Company usually produces dressings, gauzes and other medical products, only turning its attention to masks when the government ordered millions of them.

“Without this order, I wouldn’t have dared try, but we succeeded in producing local masks and we are very proud,” said company owner Daniel Lev.

Israel has requested 40 million regular sanitary masks, plus 11 million N95 models which offer a higher level of protection.

Around 15 percent of Sion employees are making masks, with a constant stream passing through the production line before being piled up in crates.



Daniel Lev, Owner and CEO of the Sion Medical factory in the southern city of Sderot, on June 15, 2020. (MENAHEM KAHANA/AFP)

“We have risen to the challenge that the state of Israel put forward, to make enough masks as quickly as possible so that Israel doesn’t need to import anymore,” said Lev, barely heard above the whirl of machines.

He said the firm can produce four million regular masks and two million N95 ones a month, the latter with machines imported from China by the defense ministry.

Announcing the project earlier this month, Defense Minister Benny Gantz said the government was “preparing for a second wave of the virus.”

Gantz said the local production “removes our dependence on foreign factors and contributes to the Israeli economy during a difficult period.”

Coronavirus cases have topped 19,000 in Israel with more than 300 deaths, out of a population of around nine million.

The government has relaxed its strict stay-home orders, but over 170 schools have shut after hundreds of students and teachers were infected.

Mask-wearing is mandatory in public and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has urged Israelis to stick to the rule to keep infection rates down.



According to Lev, it will take just two to three weeks before Israel gains “total independence” on mask production if a second wave strikes.

After completing the domestic order, Sion staff may turn their focus to the global market, as countries struggle to source enough masks to confront the pandemic.

“They don’t want to be dependent solely on Chinese [producers]”, said Lev, who has been contacted by customers in Latin America where coronavirus is spreading most rapidly.