

# Iran coronavirus deaths jump to 26, top officials infected

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The coronavirus epidemic in Iran has cost 26 lives, the health ministry announced Thursday, with a vice president becoming the latest top official to be infected as the spread appeared to accelerate.

Health ministry spokesman Kianoush Jahanpour told a news conference that the tally of infections had risen to 245 with 106 more cases confirmed—the highest number for a single day since Iran announced its first infections on February 19.

The Islamic republic has the highest death toll from the virus outside China, where COVID-19 first emerged.

Among the latest coronavirus sufferers is one of Iran's seven vice presidents, Massoumeh Ebtekar, who oversees women's affairs.

Ebtekar, a former spokeswoman for students who took 52 Americans hostage at the US embassy in Tehran in 1979, is being treated at home and members of her team have been tested, state news agency IRNA reported.

Mojtaba Zolnour, head of parliament's national security and foreign affairs committee, also contracted the virus, appearing in a video posted by Fars news agency saying he was in self-quarantine.

The cleric is a deputy for the Shiite holy city of Qom in central Iran where the country's first cases were detected.

According to media reports, among the deceased in Qom on Thursday was theologian Hadi Khorroshahi, who in 1981 was named Iran's first ambassador to the Vatican.

The announcement by Zolnour comes two days after another top official, deputy health minister Iraj Harirchi, head of the government's coronavirus task force, said he too had contracted the virus.

**Must 'not gather'**

On Wednesday, Iranian authorities announced domestic travel restrictions for people with confirmed or suspected infections.

They also placed curbs on access to major Shiite pilgrimage sites, including the Imam Reza shrine in second city Mashhad and the Fatima Masumeh shrine in Qom.

Visitors to the shrines will be allowed to visit on condition they are provided "with hand-washing liquids, proper (health) information, masks", Health Minister Saeed Namaki said.

They must "not gather together in groups but just pray and leave", he said.

In a rare move, authorities announced the cancellation of the main Friday weekly prayers in Tehran, Qom and Mashhad as well as in the capitals of 22 of Iran's 31 provinces and other infected areas.

School closures have been extended in affected areas and universities are to remain closed for another week starting from Saturday.

"All of these decisions are temporary and if the situation changes, we might intensify or ease them," Namaki said.

In a message of thanks to doctors and nurses, Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said he hoped their efforts would help "eradicate this sinister virus soon".

International health experts have expressed concern about Iran's handling of the outbreak. But Tehran insists the situation has been "improving".

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