

Iran raises its death toll to 19 amid 139 coronavirus cases

February 26 2020, by Jon Gambrell



A worker disinfects a public bus against coronavirus in Tehran, Iran, in early morning of Wednesday, Feb. 26, 2020. Iran's government said Tuesday that more than a dozen people had died nationwide from the new coronavirus, rejecting claims of a much higher death toll of 50 by a lawmaker from the city of Qom that has been at the epicenter of the virus in the country. (AP Photo/Ebrahim Noroozi)

Iran's president said Tehran has no immediate plans to quarantine cities over the new coronavirus rapidly spreading across the country, even as the Islamic Republic suffers the highest death toll outside of China with 19 killed amid 139 cases confirmed on Wednesday.

President Hassan Rouhani went on to acknowledge that may take "one, two or three weeks" to get control of the virus in Iran, linked to most of the over 200 confirmed cases of the virus now spread across the Mideast. That comes after the top official in charge of Iran's response to the coronavirus tested positive for the illness after a day earlier trying to downplay the disease.

Still, Rouhani sought to portray the virus crisis in terms of Iran's tense relations with the U.S.

"Coronavirus must not be turned into a weapon for our enemies to halt work and production in our country," Rouhani said, according to a transcript posted to the Iranian presidency's website.

Iranian state television reported Wednesday that 19 people have been killed by the new coronavirus amid 139 confirmed cases in the country so far.

The announcement by a state TV anchor came as Health Ministry spokesman Kianoush Jahanpour urged Iranians to avoid "nonessential travel," particularly to the hard-hit provinces of the country such as Gilan and Qom.



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The coronavirus has infected more than 80,000 people globally, causing over 2,700 deaths, mainly in China. The World Health Organization has named the illness COVID-19.

Experts remain concerned that Iran may be underreporting cases and deaths, given the rapid spread from Iran across the Persian Gulf. Ahmad Amirabadi Farahani, a hard-line lawmaker in Iran alleged Monday there

had been 50 deaths in the Iranian city of Qom alone, which was denied by authorities.

Rouhani's estimate of as much as three weeks to control the virus comes after officials repeatedly downplaying the virus previously. That's spark more concern among Iranians already angry over nationwide economic protests, the U.S. drone strike that killed a top Iranian general and Iran accidentally shooting down a Ukrainian jetliner and then denying it for days. A recent parliamentary election also saw the country's lowest-ever recorded turnout.



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A Health Ministry spokesman on Tuesday suggested it could take as long as late April to control the virus. And with the Persian New Year, or Nowruz, coming March 20, experts worry about the virus spreading even further across the country if not stopped by then.

"Containment of the COVID-19 virus within Iran will be a challenge because of Iran's poor health infrastructure and traditional unwillingness

to communicate freely and openly across all branches of government and between health institutions," the Austin, Texas private intelligence firm Stratfor said.

That worry was echoed by analysts at the Eurasia Group.

"Tehran is likely significantly underestimating the risk posed by an outbreak of coronavirus to its citizens, economy and neighbors," the analysts wrote. "Iran has a relatively robust public health system, although it has been weakened by US sanctions. But a breakdown in national-level decision-making has severely hampered its ability contain the spread of the virus."

Meanwhile Wednesday, Egyptian airport officials said the country's national carrier, EgyptAir, has indefinitely extended the suspension of its flights to and from China, for the safety of its passengers. The officials spoke on condition of anonymity as they weren't authorized to brief journalists.

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Citation: Iran raises its death toll to 19 amid 139 coronavirus cases (2020, February 26) retrieved 26 April 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-02-iran-death-toll-coronavirus-cases.html>

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