

Iran says 'tens of thousands' may get tested for coronavirus

February 29 2020, by Jon Gambrell



A pedestrian wearing a face mask crosses a square in western Tehran, Iran, Saturday, Feb. 29, 2020. Iran is preparing for the possibility of "tens of thousands" of people getting tested for the new coronavirus as the number of confirmed cases spiked again Saturday, Health Ministry spokesman Kianoush Jahanpour said, underscoring the fear both at home and abroad over the outbreak in the Islamic Republic. (AP Photo/Vahid Salemi)

Iran is preparing for the possibility of "tens of thousands" of people getting tested for the new coronavirus as the number of confirmed cases spiked again Saturday, an official said, underscoring the fear both at home and abroad over the outbreak in the Islamic Republic.

The virus and the COVID-19 illness it causes have killed 43 people out of 593 confirmed cases in Iran, Health Ministry spokesman Kianoush Jahanpour said. He disputed a report by the BBC's Persian service citing anonymous medical officials in Iran putting the [death toll](#) at over four times as much.

But the number of known cases versus deaths would put the virus' death rate in Iran at over 7%, much higher than other countries. That's worried experts at the World Health Organization and elsewhere that Iran may be underreporting the number of cases now affecting it.

Yet even as Iran sends spray trucks and fumigators into the streets, officials still are trying to downplay the virus' reach.

"During these 10 days that we are talking about the coronavirus in the country, more than 480 people of our country has been killed in traffic accidents, but no one noticed them," Jahanpour said.

The virus has infected more than 85,000 people and caused more than 2,900 deaths since emerging in China. Iran, with 43 people dead, has the world's highest death toll outside of China. Of the 730 confirmed cases scattered across the Mideast, the majority trace back to the Islamic Republic.



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Saturday's new toll of 593 confirmed cases represents a jump of 205 cases—a 52% increase from the 388 reported the day before. Jahanpour has warned that large increases in the number of confirmed cases would happen as Iran now has 15 laboratories testing for the virus.

Late Friday night, a BBC Persian report citing sources within Iran's medical community put the death toll at at least 210. State television in

Saudi Arabia and associated media, as well as Iranian exile groups, seized on the figure amid their wider political disputes with Tehran.

Jahanpour however disputed the report as being politically motivated, conflating other causes of deaths with the coronavirus and relying on sources without access to Iran's coronavirus testing labs.

"The queen's media, BBC Persian, is worried about staying behind Saudi and Albanian networks in the 'lie competition.'" he said. Albania is home to the Iranian exile group Mujahedeen-e-Khalq.



Pedestrians wearing face masks walk on a sidewalk in western Tehran, Iran, Saturday, Feb. 29, 2020. Iran is preparing for the possibility of "tens of thousands" of people getting tested for the new coronavirus as the number of confirmed cases spiked again Saturday, Health Ministry spokesman Kianoush

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However, at the same news conference, Jahanpour suggested "tens of thousands" could seek testing for the coronavirus. He also encouraged people to continue to avoid mass gatherings—even funerals for those who died of the virus. Authorities later banned the public from visiting patients at hospitals nationwide, state television reported.

"The safest place is our homes and our cities," he said. "We have to reduce our visits, even attending to funerals, and of course those people who are mourning, will feel guilty if they find that their ceremony causes the disease to spread."

Concerns continue to grow, however, as online videos showed an angry crowd setting fire to the courtyard of a medical clinic overnight in the southern city of Bandar Abbas. Semiofficial media reported those gathered wrongly believed the clinic housed people sick with the new coronavirus.



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Earlier Saturday, Bahrain threatened legal prosecution against travelers who came from Iran and hadn't been tested for the new coronavirus, and also barred public gatherings for two weeks.

The tiny island nation off the coast of Saudi Arabia has been hard-hit with cases and shut down some flights to halt the spread of the virus.

All of Bahrain's cases link back to Iran, where even top officials have contracted the virus.

Bahrain's Interior Ministry said in a statement that 2,292 people had come to the kingdom from Iran before the announcement of the outbreak there. Of those, only "310 citizens" had called authorities and undergone testing, the ministry said, raising the possibility of the untested being arrested and charged if they refuse.

The ministry "affirmed that the required legal proceedings would be taken against anyone who returned from Iran in February and didn't call to make appointments for the tests," the Interior Ministry said. "It highlighted that preventing the outbreak of the infection is the responsibility of individuals and society as a whole."



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Sunni-ruled Bahrain has engaged in a yearslong crackdown on all dissent in the island kingdom since its 2011 Arab Spring protests, which saw its majority Shiite population demand greater political freedoms. Militants have launched small, sporadic attacks in the time since which Bahrain security forces blame on Iran, the Mideast's Shiite power.

Qatar announced Saturday its first coronavirus case, a Qatari citizen who was on an earlier evacuation flight from Iran. The United Arab Emirates said it would indefinitely shut down all nurseries across the country, home to Dubai and Abu Dhabi, beginning Sunday.

Also Saturday, Saudi Arabia announced it would bar citizens of the Gulf Cooperation Council from Islam's holiest sites in Mecca and Medina over concerns about the virus' spread. The GCC is a six-nation group including Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.



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People wearing face masks wait for bus in a bus stop in a street in western Tehran, Iran, Saturday, Feb. 29, 2020. Iran is preparing for the possibility of "tens of thousands" of people getting tested for the new coronavirus as the number of confirmed cases spiked again Saturday, Health Ministry spokesman Kianoush Jahanpour said, underscoring the fear both at home and abroad over the outbreak in the Islamic Republic. (AP Photo/Vahid Salemi)



Customers wait as a pharmacist prepares medicines at a pharmacy in western Tehran, Iran, Saturday, Feb. 29, 2020. Iran is preparing for the possibility of "tens of thousands" of people getting tested for the new coronavirus as the number of confirmed cases spiked again Saturday, Health Ministry spokesman Kianoush Jahanpour said, underscoring the fear both at home and abroad over the outbreak in the Islamic Republic. (AP Photo/Vahid Salemi)

Saudi Arabia on Thursday closed off the holy sites to foreign pilgrims over the [coronavirus](#), disrupting travel for thousands of Muslims already headed to the kingdom and potentially affecting plans later this year for millions more ahead of the fasting month of Ramadan and the annual hajj pilgrimage.

It represented an unprecedented move, one that wasn't taken even during

the 1918 flu epidemic that killed tens of millions worldwide.

Meanwhile, tiny, oil-rich Kuwait simply has told its citizens not to travel abroad anywhere.

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