

Virus outbreak in Iran sickens hundreds, including leaders

February 28 2020, by Jon Gambrell



Pedestrians walk as some of them wear masks in downtown Tehran, Iran, Thursday, Feb. 27, 2020. Amid fear and uncertainty caused by the spread of a new virus, Iranians are taking extra caution to avoid getting infected, as authorities canceled Friday prayers in Tehran, Qom and other cities. (AP Photo/Vahid Salemi)

After facing sanctions and the risk of war amid tensions with the United States, Iran's Shiite theocracy now has an enemy in the new coronavirus that infiltrated its leadership in plain view of state-controlled media and despite repeated denials of any looming threat.

The outbreak of the new virus in Iran has been dramatic—the head of Iran's task force to stop the illness, known as COVID-19, was seen coughing, sweating and wheezing across televised interviews before acknowledging he was infected. Then, days later, a visibly pale official sat only meters (feet) away from President Hassan Rouhani and other top leaders before she too reportedly came down with the virus.

The virus has also laid bare the challenges facing the Islamic Republic some 40 years after its founding. While its civilian government urges Shiite shrines to be closed, clerics keep them open and some circulate purported remedies to the virus that have no basis in science. Tehran's top-down government, where Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has final say on all state matters, now has to come to terms with the highest death toll from the virus outside of China, days after insisting everything was fine.

Iran's success—or failure—in combating the virus will have an impact far beyond the country's 80 million people as the majority of cases in the Mideast now link back to Iran.



A woman walks as she wears a mask in downtown Tehran, Iran, Thursday, Feb. 27, 2020. Amid fear and uncertainty caused by the spread of a new virus, Iranians are taking extra caution to avoid getting infected, as authorities canceled Friday prayers in Tehran, Qom and other cities. (AP Photo/Vahid Salemi)

"We will have a tough week ahead," Iranian Health Minister Saeed Namaki warned. "The main peak of the coronavirus will be in next week and coming days."

On Friday, Health Ministry spokesman Kianoush Jahanpour again reported a huge spike in cases, saying there were now 388 confirmed coronavirus cases in Iran and 34 deaths. In brief remarks from Tehran, he cautioned the number of cases would likely further spike as Iran now has 15 laboratories testing samples.

In Tehran and other cities, authorities canceled Friday prayer services to limit crowds. In the capital Radio Tehran, which typically carries the prayer, played only traditional Iranian music. Universities are to remain closed another week. Schools will be closed for at least three days, Namaki said. Parliament also will be closed, state television said, citing a lawmaker.



People walk as they wear masks in downtown Tehran, Iran, Thursday, Feb. 27, 2020. Amid fear and uncertainty caused by the spread of a new virus, Iranians are taking extra caution to avoid getting infected, as authorities canceled Friday prayers in Tehran, Qom and other cities. (AP Photo/Vahid Salemi)

Meanwhile, Iranian state media made a point to show the government is

addressing the crisis. In the city of Mashhad, at the Imam Reza Shrine, hazmat-suited cleaners fogged disinfectant across surfaces that the faithful kiss and touch as workers installed hand sanitizers. Trucks from Iran's paramilitary Revolutionary Guard sprayed down streets and sidewalks in the holy city of Qom, the epicenter of the country's outbreak.

But questions still remain over Iran's count. Experts, including at the World Health Organization, worry the Islamic Republic may be underreporting the number of cases in the country.

Iran denied for days that the virus was in the country acknowledging it just as it was trying to pump up enthusiasm for the country's parliamentary election—a vote that saw the lowest voter turnout since the 1979 Islamic Revolution.



A pharmacist shows gloves to a customer in a pharmacy in downtown Tehran, Iran, Thursday, Feb. 27, 2020. Amid fear and uncertainty caused by the spread of a new virus, Iranians are taking extra caution to avoid getting infected, as authorities canceled Friday prayers in Tehran, Qom and other cities. (AP Photo/Vahid Salemi)

By doing so, Iran likely allowed the virus to spread rapidly, reaching even into the upper echelons of its power structure as it sickened four lawmakers, top clerics and other officials.

On Thursday, word spread that one of Iran's many vice presidents, Masoumeh Ebtekar, had contracted the virus. Ebtekar, 59, is better known as "Sister Mary," the English-speaking spokeswoman for the students who seized the U.S. Embassy in Tehran in 1979 and sparked the 444-day hostage crisis.

Ebtekar on Wednesday attended a Cabinet meeting chaired by Rouhani, 71. Other top officials, most in their late 50s and 60s, sat within several meters (feet) from her as well. Jahanpour, the Health Ministry spokesman, said the average age of those killed by the virus and the illness it brings is over 60.

State media has not said what measures those attending the meeting with Ebtekar were now taking. However, the concern about the virus' spread among Iran's elite has reached into Austria, where Foreign Minister Alexander Schallenberg tested negative for it after a recent trip to Tehran.



Tehran resident Mohammad Reza Khani, wearing mask and gloves, speaks with The Associated Press in downtown Tehran, Iran, Thursday, Feb. 27, 2020. Amid fear and uncertainty caused by the spread of a new virus, Iranians are taking extra caution to avoid getting infected, as authorities canceled Friday prayers in Tehran, Qom and other cities. The billboard at rear show soap dispenser reading (Farsi) "If you are somewhere with no access to water and soap, use alcohol-based sanitizers." (AP Photo/Vahid Salemi)

Worries persist over Shiite shrines remaining open in the country. Saudi Arabia on Thursday took the unprecedented decision to close off the holiest sites in Islam 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.

Some Iranian clerics also have offered advice with no basis in science, like Sheikh Abbas Tabrizian in Qom who told followers to give themselves a suppository of essential oils to ward off the virus.

Elsewhere, a major cycling race in the United Arab Emirates was canceled early Friday after two Italians tested positive for the new virus, setting off a quarantine at two Abu Dhabi hotels that also ensnared four-time Tour de France winner Chris Froome of Britain. That pushed the overall number of confirmed cases to 21 in the UAE, a federation of seven sheikhdoms on the Arabian Peninsula.



In this Feb. 14, 2013 file photo, Iranian Vice-President Masoumeh Ebtekar gives an interview to The Associated Press, in Tehran, Iran. On Thursday, Feb. 27, 2020, the English-language IRAN daily newspaper via its Twitter account, said Masoumeh Ebtekar, a vice president in the Islamic Republic and a spokeswoman

for the 1979 hostage-takers, has the new coronavirus. (AP Photo/Vahid Salemi, File)

In Cairo, authorities allowed a plane carrying 114 Chinese tourists into Egypt despite EgyptAir halting flights to China amid the outbreak. The tourists showed no symptoms of the virus and will be monitored during their weeklong vacation, said officials who spoke on condition of anonymity as they were not authorized to speak to journalists.

Lebanon has flights and barred citizens of China, Iran, Italy and South Korea from visiting the country, though Lebanese citizens and residents will be allowed back in. Qatar separately flew home its citizens from Iran and put them in a 14-day quarantine.

The Iran government's slow response and the unrelenting pressure Iranians face, especially as the country's rial currency this week hit its lowest value in a year against the U.S. dollar, has seen many Iranians turn to dark humor. Jokes spread fast across social media, including one saying a government that previously cracked down on demonstrators now will lock up the virus.



In this Monday Feb. 24, 2020 image made from video the head of Iran's counter-coronavirus task force, Iraj Harirchi, left, wipes his face during a press briefing with government spokesman Ali Rabiei, in Tehran, Iran. Harirchi, has tested positive for the virus himself, authorities announced Tuesday, amid concerns the outbreak may be far wider than officially acknowledged. The announcement regarding Harirchi came after the news conference seeking to minimize the danger posed by the outbreak. (APTN via AP)



A nurse cares for patients in a ward dedicated for people infected with the coronavirus, at Forqani Hospital in Qom, 78 miles (125 kilometers) south of the capital Tehran, Iran, Wednesday, Feb. 26, 2020. Iran's president said Wednesday, that 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. (Mohammad Mohsenzadeh/Mizan News Agency via AP)



Spokesman for Iran's Health Ministry Kianoush Jahanpour poses for a photo before an interview in Tehran, Iran, Tuesday, Feb. 25, 2020. The head of Iran's counter-coronavirus task force has tested positive for the virus himself, authorities announced Tuesday, showing the challenges facing the Islamic Republic amid concerns the outbreak may be far wider than officially acknowledged. The announcement comes as countries across the Mideast say they've had confirmed cases of the virus that link back to Iran, which for days denied having the virus. (AP Photo/Ebrahim Noroozi)



Britain's Chris Froome of Ineos Team signs in before start of the first stage of the UAE cycling tour in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, Sunday, Feb, 23, 2020. (AP Photo/ Mahmoud Khaled)

Then come the videos. Iraj Harirchi, who led Iran's coronavirus task force, sweated at the podium during a news conference and then later coughed all over the set of a state TV interview program, its female host looking down and away.

"I came from a cold place," Harirchi said, attempting to joke before bringing the crook of his arm to his face. "I made a mistake. I should cover my mouth like this."

Soon afterward, Harirchi acknowledged testing positive for the virus.

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