

Iran defends response as virus deaths surpass 1,000

March 18 2020

Iran said its novel coronavirus death toll surpassed 1,000 on Wednesday as President Hassan Rouhani defended the response of his administration, which has yet to impose a lockdown.

The COVID-19 outbreak in sanctions-hit Iran is one of the deadliest for any country outside China, where the disease originated.

Rouhani's government reported another 147 deaths—a record high for a single day in the month since it announced the emergence of the disease.

The virus has now killed 1,135 people in Iran out of 17,361 cases of infection based on official figures.

"Some ask why the government isn't intervening, but I think we have intervened significantly," said Rouhani.

"Great things have been done (including) measures no other country has taken," he said in televised remarks after a weekly meeting of his cabinet.

"We will get past these hard days," added Rouhani, who was flanked by ministers wearing [face masks](#).

Official tolls given at the national level have usually lagged behind reports by local media and have sometimes been contradicted by provincial authorities.

The health ministry said 5,710 people have overcome the virus.

One person who recovered was a 103-year-old woman, state news agency IRNA reported, despite overwhelming evidence that the elderly are the most at risk.

The unnamed woman had been hospitalised in the central city of Semnan for about a week.

But she was "discharged after making a complete recovery", Semnan University of Medical Sciences head Navid Danayi was quoted as saying.

IRNA did not say how she was treated.

Officials have repeatedly called on Iranians to stay home for the country's approaching New Year holidays.

'Be patient'

Since it announced its first two deaths in the holy Shiite city of Qom on February 19, Iran has taken a series of steps to contain the virus.

It has closed schools and universities until early April and also four key Shiite pilgrimage sites, including the Fatima Masumeh shrine in Qom.

Iran has also discouraged travel, cancelled the main weekly Friday prayers and temporarily closed parliament.

Few officials have directly commented on why a lockdown has not been imposed.

But Tehran's mayor has said the economy may not be able to handle the

cost of doing so, especially while it is under crippling US sanctions.

"In a normal situation and a good economy, we could have imposed a lockdown," Pirouz Hanachi was quoted as saying by Mehr News agency.

"But what comes next, like providing necessary goods or compensating for losses across Iran, is not possible, so a complete lockdown cannot be done."

The United States withdrew from a landmark nuclear deal and began reimposing punishing sanctions on Iran in 2018, blocking banking transactions and oil sales, among other sectors.

Iran has intensified calls for sanctions relief during the outbreak.

As part of that campaign, it sought to rally the Non-Aligned Movement to condemn the sanctions in a statement, but some members including Bahrain, Morocco and Saudi Arabia opposed the move.

"It is very unfortunate that some Arab and Islamic states would do such a thing against the people of Iran during these dire circumstances and disregard the requisites of good neighbourship," foreign ministry spokesman Abbas Mousavi said.

"If the fight against this global epidemic pauses or fails, it will become a global catastrophe that no country will be safe from."

Iran said the outbreak could take longer to overcome if people keep travelling, especially during the holidays.

"Now everyone knows about this disease, and what is very strange is that some don't take it seriously," Deputy Health Minister Alireza Raisi said.

"If people help, we can control it, and if not, then expect it to last more than two months."

Raisi complained that in Tehran "bazaars are busy" and that people travel in their cars despite warnings not to do so.

"Just be patient for these two weeks so that, God willing, we can overcome this virus."

Nowrouz, which starts on Friday this year and will last until early April, normally sees many travel to popular northern provinces like Gilan and Mazandaran, two of the worst-hit by the [coronavirus](#).

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