

Fears raised in Iran of 'fresh outbreak' of virus

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Iranian health officials Saturday raised fears of a "fresh outbreak" of coronavirus cases in their country, which has paid the deadliest price in the Middle East from the pandemic.

As the predominantly Shiite country marked the start of the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, a day later than much of the Muslim world, another 76 fatalities were declared, raising Iran's official death toll to 6,650.

Iran has in phases since April 11 allowed the reopening of a number of businesses that were closed as part of measures to curb COVID-19.

The spread of the disease has slowed since the start of April, but Alireza Zali, the anti-coronavirus coordinator for the capital, on Saturday criticised "hasty reopenings".

They could "create new waves of sickness in Tehran and complicate efforts to bring the epidemic under control", he said, quoted by the official news agency IRNA.

Health ministry spokesman Kianoush Jahanpour said Iran has now recorded 89,328 cases of COVID-19, including 1,134 over the past 24 hours, since its first case in February.

The number of Iranian casualties is widely thought to be much higher, however.

Jahanpour reiterated that social distancing and hygiene measures to guard against the novel [coronavirus](#) needed to remain in place.

The ministry's infectious diseases department head, Mohammad Mehdi Gouya, warned of "signs of a fresh outbreak" in provinces such as Gilan and Mazandaran in the north and Qom in central Iran "where we made great efforts to control the epidemic".

Iran, already weakened by tough US sanctions, has struggled to contain the virus outbreak since reporting its first cases on February 19—two deaths in the Shiite holy city of Qom.

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