

Iran says virus deaths close to 7,000

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Iran said Friday it had recorded nearly 7,000 deaths from the novel coronavirus, warning of infection clusters in new regions after it partially eased lockdown measures.

Health ministry spokesman Kianoush Jahanpour said the COVID-19

illness had claimed a further 51 lives over 24 hours into Sunday.

The ministry raised the overall death toll to 6,988 since Iran announced its first fatalities in the Shiite pilgrimage city of Qom in February.

Jahanpour warned that cases were rising "in the province of Lorestan, and to some extent in Kermanshah, Sistan and Baluchistan".

"Khuzestan province is still in a critical situation," he added.

The southwestern province has become Iran's new coronavirus [focal point](#), with the most critical "red" ranking on the country's colour-coded risk scale.

It is the only region so far where authorities have reimposed business lockdowns after a country-wide relaxation in April.

Iran stopped publishing provincial figures for the [coronavirus](#) last month, but the [health ministry](#)'s latest report said there is a "rising trend or the beginning of a peak" in eight provinces, including Khuzestan.

The country on Friday reported its highest number of new infections in more than a month.

A virus taskforce official said Sunday that the increase was due to a surge in testing, not just of COVID-19 patients with [severe symptoms](#).

Early in the outbreak "our focus was on severe cases that had to be hospitalised, but as we started to manage the disease we looked at those infected and not hospitalised," said Ali Akbar Haghdoost, head of the taskforce's epidemiology committee.

"It is possible that the reported number of infections have gone up, but

this in no way means more have been infected with COVID-19," he told ISNA news agency.

According to Jahanpour, 1,806 new cases had been confirmed across Iran in the past day, bringing the total to 120,198.

Over 1,460 of the new cases were "outpatients, including those who had been in close contact with the infected," he said.

The ministry said 94,464 people hospitalised with the virus have recovered and been discharged.

Experts both at home and abroad have voiced scepticism about Iran's official figures, saying the real toll could be much higher.

Iran also cancelled rallies held annually in solidarity with the Palestinians, set for Friday next week.

President Hassan Rouhani had said Saturday that the Qods (Jerusalem) Day parades would go ahead with some measures against the virus.

But organisers said Sunday the event could not be held "decently" and would be scrapped apart from a televised speech by the supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

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