Iran reports most new virus cases since outbreak began

June 4 2020

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Iran announced 3,574 new coronavirus infections Thursday, the most in one day since the pandemic started, as authorities increase health warnings following a resurgence in recorded cases.

After hitting a near two-month low in early May, novel coronavirus infections have been on a rising trajectory in the Islamic republic, which is battling the Middle East's deadliest outbreak of the disease.

Thursday was the fourth straight day that the daily caseload had topped 3,000.

The previous high was 3,186, recorded on March 30, at the height of the initial outbreak.

The health ministry has been taking no chances and has stepped up a public health campaign in recent days.

"Not respecting social distancing and public and personal hygiene rules, along with undertaking unnecessary travel, can have irreparable consequences," warned an announcement running on repeat on the state television information channel.

Health ministry spokesman Kianoush Jahanpour said Thursday that 59 people had died of COVID-19 over the past 24 hours, taking Iran's overall official toll to 8,071.

Despite the uptick in new infections, the official number of daily deaths has remained below 100 in recent weeks.

A total of 164,270 people have tested positive for the virus since the first cases were announced in February.

There has been some scepticism at home and abroad about Iran's official figures, with concerns the real toll could be much higher.

'Completely careless'

Officials have appeared to suggest that the surge in new cases could be the result of wider testing rather than a second wave of infection.

Jahanpour said Thursday that Iran had now conducted more than a million tests.

The state TV channel has also been broadcasting an animated info-graphic, accompanied by dramatic music, saying that Iran was faring much better than other countries in the pandemic.

Although it has registered the most deaths from the virus in the Middle East, official figures put its toll far behind several other countries in Europe and beyond.

The Islamic republic's archfoe, the United States, which has reimposed crippling sanctions on Iran's economy, has reported the highest total number of cases and deaths worldwide from the disease.

President Hassan Rouhani has praised the Iranian government's performance in dealing with coronavirus as a source of "great pride", saying late last month that Iran was "among the countries that have succeeded".

But Health Minister Saeed Namaki, who is a doctor by profession, and other officials are using more tempered language.

On Tuesday, the minister lamented that people were ignoring social distancing rules.

"The fact that people have become completely careless regarding this disease" was of great concern, the ISNA news agency quoted him as saying.

'Not taking threat seriously'

"Certain people and certain officials do not take (the threat of) coronavirus seriously", state TV cites Namaki as saying in its rolling health messages.

Since April, authorities have progressively lifted restrictions imposed to curb the outbreak.

Iraj Harirchi, a deputy health minister who tested positive for the virus in late February, has "strongly" recommended the use of masks and urged Iranians to limit unnecessary travel.

According to state television, he expressed concern that the population seemed less convinced than before about the need to stay home and respect social distancing.

Meanwhile, life in Tehran, a city of some 10 million people, has almost returned to normal, with traffic jams and crowded streets, buses and metros, though wearing a mask is compulsory on public transport.

But nine of the country's 31 provinces are still under a "health alert", Jahanpour said Wednesday, while the southwestern province of Khuzestan remains classified as a "red zone"—the highest level of risk in the country.

People "either have total confidence in us or think the coronavirus has gone. The latter is not true at all," Namaki said.

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