

Iran reports new surge in coronavirus cases

29 February 2020

Iran on Saturday reported a surge in new coronavirus cases as the number of deaths jumped to 43, but it dismissed as "rumours" a report the real toll was much higher.

Since it announced its first deaths from COVID-19, Iran has scrambled to bring the outbreak under control, shutting schools, suspending cultural and sporting events and halting meetings of the cabinet and parliament.

The health ministry on Saturday reported nine new deaths and a 53 percent jump in infections over the previous 24 hours, taking the overall totals to 43 deaths among 593 cases.

That was the highest number of new cases for a single day since February 19, when Iran announced its first two deaths in Qom, a centre for Islamic studies and pilgrimages, including from abroad.

Citing unnamed sources in Iran's health system, the BBC's Persian-language service said on Friday that at least 210 people had died in the COVID-19 outbreak.

Most of the dead were in Qom or Tehran, the London-based broadcaster said.

Health ministry spokesman Kianoush Jahanpour accused foreign media of spreading misinformation about the outbreak.

"Given the rumours and false and contradictory content that may be published from satellite networks or media which are not well-intentioned towards Iranian people, I must say that what we publish as definitive statistics is based on the latest definitive findings of laboratory tests," he said.

Fear of the virus is palpable on the streets of Tehran, which have been less crowded than usual as people apparently stayed at home.

'Rock bottom'

Traffic was flowing more freely than normal in the capital on Saturday morning, when it usually chokes the streets at the start of the working week.

The office of Tehran's governor announced a reduction in working hours in a bid to reduce the chances of the virus spreading, state television reported.

Shops and pharmacies have been struggling to meet demand as people stock up on bleach, disinfectant wipes, face masks and other sanitary products, as well as non-perishable food.

"Business... has hit rock bottom because of the coronavirus," said Hadian, owner of one of Tehran's now empty restaurants.

"If the government had informed us earlier we would have tried to buy less. Now we have to throw away a lot of food every day and lose money," he told AFP.

"With this loss we have to pay the workers and rent too, and this is very difficult for us."

Large posters have gone up on advertising billboards in the capital urging people to follow hygiene guidelines such as washing hands and not touching handrails and other objects in [public places](#).

Clinic torched

In Bandar Abbas, on Iran's Gulf coast, residents reportedly set alight a clinic rumoured to be treating people infected with coronavirus on Friday night.

"The unsubstantiated rumour that several coronavirus patients were being held at the clinic... provoked some residents to set fire to it," Fars news agency said, adding the facility denied it had any such patients.

Police and firefighters arrived and calm was restored before the blaze was extinguished, Fars

reported.

Iran's coronavirus death toll is the highest for any country other than China, where COVID-19 first emerged.

One of Iran's seven vice presidents, Massoumeh Ebtekar, and Deputy Health Minister Iraj Harirchi are among several senior officials who have been infected.

Jahanpour said on Saturday that 205 cases had been detected in the previous 24 hours, increasing the total of confirmed infections to 593.

Among the latest infections were a new outbreak of 22 cases in Golestan, a northeastern province on the Caspian Sea coast.

Many of the country's neighbours have reported [coronavirus](#) infections in people linked to Iran, and most have imposed restrictions on travel to and from the Islamic republic.

On Wednesday, Iranian authorities announced domestic travel restrictions for people with confirmed or suspected infections.

The United States and Paris-based media watchdog Reporters Without Borders have accused Iran of concealing information about the outbreak, which has claimed an unusually high proportion of the lives of those infected in the Islamic republic.

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