

Coronavirus: Iran Says New Virus Kills 54, Death Toll Climbs To 291

Agencies

Tehran: Iran said on Tuesday that COVID-19 killed 54 more people, raising the death toll to 291 amid 8,042 cases in the Islamic Republic.

Iran is the hardest-hit country in the Mideast by the new virus, which sickens but largely doesn't kill those afflicted.

Elsewhere, Lebanese Health Ministry official said that a man has died from COVID-19, marking the first known death from the infections in the country.

The official says the 56-year-old man had recently returned from Egypt. The official spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to give official statements.

The Mediterranean country has 41 confirmed cases of the new coronavirus — most of them linked to Iran. At least one patient who returned from Iran has left the hospital after two weeks successful treatment.

Lebanon has been hit by a severe financial and economic crisis since October, particularly after mass protests against the country's ruling elite broke out in October. But street demonstrations have been minimal since the outbreak of COVID-19.

Across the region, there are over 8,600 confirmed cases of the virus. Worldwide, there are over 110,000 confirmed cases of the new virus, with more than 3,800 deaths attributed to it. The number of people who have recovered is about 62,000.

For most people, the new coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough. For some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness, including pneumonia.

The vast majority of people recover from the new virus. According to the World Health Organization, people with mild illness recover in about two weeks, while those with more severe illness may take three to six weeks to recover.

In mainland China, where the virus first exploded, more than 80,000 people have been diagnosed and more than 58,000 have so far recovered.

US Looks For Spies At Sea To Take Out Iran's Oil Shipments



Agencies

Washington: The US government says it plans to crank up its unprecedented pressure on Iran by targeting shippers, port officials and insurance companies that help in storing Iranian oil.

The new measures are basically intended at curbing Iran's oil flow to China which continues imports from the Middle Eastern country despite the unilateral US sanctions.

"We will target and designate anybody that stores Iranian oil, petrochemicals or refined petroleum in violation of US sanctions, no matter where they are," David Peyman, the deputy assistant secretary of state for counter threat finance and sanctions, said on Monday.

Washington is resorting to some of the most unconventional ways which include seducing ship captains into taking photos and submitting them to the US government of anyone conducting ship-to-ship transfers — in other words turning them into virtual spies for the US government in international waters.

The Trump administra-

tion will soon issue advisories which will also warn shipping vessels against turning off tracking devices in an effort to avoid US sanctions on Iran, Peyman said.

"Transponders that provide the location of vessels should never be turned off. If they are, that presents a risk that requires heightened diligence," Peyman told the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, a think tank that supports tough sanctions on Iran.

The US government is depicting its most draconian sanctions on Iranians as a service to them, saying their ultimate goal is to promote democracy.

On Monday, Iran's Minister of Petroleum Bijan Zangeneh said US sanctions are hampering Tehran's efforts to buy food and medicine at a time when the country is grappling with a coronavirus outbreak.

Zangeneh cast aspersions on the Trump administration's claims that Iran's imports of medicine and other humanitarian goods are exempt from the unilateral US sanctions. "It's a big lie," the minister told Bloomberg.



US starts troop pullout, seeks end to Afghan leaders' feud

Agencies

Washington: The United States began withdrawing troops from Afghanistan, the US military said on Tuesday, taking a step forward on its peace deal with the Taliban while also praising Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's promise to start releasing Taliban prisoners after he had delayed for over a week.

The US-Taliban deal signed on February 29 was touted as Washington's effort to end 18 years of war in Afghanistan. The next crucial step was to be intra-Afghan talks in which all factions including the Taliban would negotiate a road map for their country's future.

But Ghani and his main political rival, Abdullah Abdullah, were each sworn in as president in separate ceremonies on Monday. Abdullah and the elections complaints commission had charged fraud in last year's vote. The duelling inaugurations have thrown plans for talks with the Taliban into chaos, although Ghani said Tuesday that he'd start putting together a negotiating team.

The disarray on the Afghan government side is indicative of the uphill task facing Washington's peace envoy Zalmay Khalilzad as he tries to get Afghanistan's bickering leadership to come together. In an early Tuesday tweet,

Khalilzad said he hoped the two leaders can "come to an agreement on an inclusive and broadly accepted government. We will continue to assist."

US military spokesman in Afghanistan Sonny Leggett said in a statement on Tuesday that the military had begun its "conditions-based reduction of forces to 8,600 over 135 days."

Currently, the US has about 13,000 soldiers in Afghanistan — 8,000 of whom are involved in training and advising Afghanistan's National Security Forces, while about 5,000 are involved in anti-terror operations and militarily supporting the Afghan army when they are requested.

Ghani had been dragging his feet on releasing some 5,000 Taliban prisoners, something agreed to in the US-Taliban deal. Ghani promised Monday to announce a decree to free the prisoners, after the US and a number of foreign dignitaries appeared to back his claim to the presidency by sending their representatives to his inauguration.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo released a statement Monday saying, "We also welcome President Ghani's announcement that he will issue a decree March 10 on Taliban prisoner release."

Taliban officials said late Monday that a flurry of biometric iden-

tifications were being conducted on Taliban prisoners, hinting at a mass release, according to prisoners currently in lockup. The Taliban officials spoke on condition of anonymity because they weren't authorised to talk to the media.

Pompeo also said he "strongly opposed" the establishment of a parallel government in Kabul, despite the early signs of one emerging. Abdullah had quickly sent his vice-presidents to occupy the official offices on Monday, ahead of Ghani's plan to send his vice presidents to their offices Tuesday.

Pompeo warned against "any use of force to resolve political differences." Both candidates — but particularly Abdullah — are backed by warlords with heavily armed militias, underscoring fears they could use force to back their candidate.

The US has said its partial troop withdrawal over an 18-month period provided for in the deal will be linked to the Taliban keeping their promises to help fight terror in Afghanistan, but not to the success of talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government.

On the weekend, Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahed said the insurgent group was committed to their agreement with the United States and called on Washington to do its part to make sure their prisoners were freed.

Rockets Mar Ghani's Swearing-In As Rival Inaugurates Self

Agencies

KABUL: Rocket fire interrupted the swearing-in ceremony on Monday for Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, whose second-term win has been undercut by his rival simultaneously claiming the office ahead of critical peace talks with the Taliban.

The bitter feud between Ghani and his former chief executive Abdullah Abdullah has raised fresh fears for Afghanistan's fragile democracy just as the US prepares to leave the country following an agreement last month with a resurgent Taliban.

Within hours, Pakistan announced its support for Ghani.

Prime Minister Imran Khan took to Twitter to extend greetings: "I want to congratulate



Afghanistan's President Ashraf Ghani & look forward to working with him. Pakistan will do everything it possibly can to bring peace and stability in our region."

Polls in the war-torn country were held in September, but repeated delays and accusations of widespread voter fraud meant that Ghani, the incumbent, was only narrowly declared the winner in February — sparking a furious response

from Abdullah, who vowed to form his own parallel government.

On Monday Ghani, dressed in traditional Afghan clothing and white turban, arrived at the presidential palace to be sworn in, surrounded by supporters, senior political figures and foreign dignitaries including US special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad and General Scott Miller, who heads US forces in Afghanistan.

Minutes later, in another corner of the sprawling palace compound, a suit-clad Abdullah inaugurated himself as president, vowing to "safeguard the independence, national sovereignty, territorial integrity" of Afghanistan.

As hundreds of people watched Ghani's ceremony, at least two loud explosions were heard, prompting some to flee.

President Xi visits Wuhan as coronavirus outbreak slows in China

Agencies

Beijing, China - Chinese President Xi Jinping has made his first visit to Wuhan since the outbreak of the coronavirus in what could be seen as a signal from the government that the health crisis is coming under control.

Xi, who has been largely unseen throughout the epidemic, made his first appearance on Tuesday in the region that had been under lockdown for weeks.

State news agency Xinhua said the president wanted to "visit and express regards to" those affected by the infection, including medical workers and patients.

National television broadcaster CCTV said Xi began his visit at Huoshenshan hospital, one of the makeshift medical facilities treating patients in severe and critical conditions.

Images published in state-owned media outlets showed Xi greeting the healthcare workers and meeting with health officials, as well as waving to a coronavirus patient through video conferencing.

More than 80,000 people have been infected in the country. More than 3,100 have died.

Xi's visit came at a time when reported cases of coronavirus infection, known as COVID-19, are steadily declining in China.

The 'Wuhan Shake'

In recent days, only a few dozen confirmed cases were reported, compared with thousands during the peak of the epidemic.

Many provinces in China have also reported zero new cases



for a number of days.

Additionally, the government also ordered the closing down of the makeshift hospitals in Wuhan due to the decline in the number of reported cases.

According to reports, less than 20,000 of the confirmed cases are still under treatment, with almost 60,000 having reportedly recovered.

'Political show'

Throughout the outbreak in China, President Xi made very few public appearances.

For people in Wuhan, who have been under quarantine measures, his visit did little to appease residents who are becoming more resentful of the government's response.

"When all of us were asking where Xi Jinping was in the initial days of the outbreak, he made zero appearance," a Wuhan resident, who asked to remain anonymous for fear of repercussions, told Al Jazeera.

"After the peak of the epidemic had passed and the outbreak is under control, he came and told people 'remember me, I have indeed come to visit you'. This kind of political show is disgusting."

Saudi Arabia To Fine People Up To \$133,000 For Hiding Health Details On Entry



Agencies

DUBAI: Saudi Arabia said on Monday it will impose a fine of up to \$133,000 on people who do not disclose their health-related information and travel details at entry points, as the Gulf state works to prevent the spread of coronavirus.

The kingdom on Sunday imposed a temporary lockdown on its eastern oil-producing province of Qatif, where the majority of the 15 individuals diagnosed with the disease reside.

Some have failed to disclose travelling to Iran to the authorities upon returning to Saudi Arabia via other Gulf Arab states.

Saudi Arabia suspended travel with nine countries including neighbouring Arab states on Monday and said legal action would be taken against any citizen travelling to Iran, which reported 237

deaths from the virus on Monday.

The kingdom said most of the individuals with coronavirus had returned from Iran or Iraq — home to Shia Muslim shrines — or interacted with people who visited the Islamic Republic. Qatif has a large Shia population.

"All the travellers coming to the kingdom by international flights, managers and workers of other transportation means have to respect local and international health directives," said a statement from the kingdom's public prosecutor.

A fine of up to \$133,000 will be imposed on people who do not comply, it said, adding that transport professionals will be held responsible for any fallout from their violations.

Authorities in Saudi Arabia, the birthplace of Islam, on Monday also asked imams to deliver Friday prayer sermons in less than 15 minutes.

NEWSMAKERS

27 people dead in Iran after consuming alcohol rumoured to 'cure' coronavirus



Twenty-seven people have died from methanol poisoning in Iran after rumours that drinking alcohol can help cure the novel coronavirus infection, state news agency IRNA reported on Monday.

The outbreak of the virus in

Islamic republic is one of the deadliest outside of China, where the disease originated.

Twenty have died in the southwestern province of Khuzestan and seven in the northern region of Alborz after consuming bootleg alcohol, IRNA said. Drinking alcohol is banned

in Iran for everyone except some non-Muslim religious minorities.

Local media regularly report on lethal cases of poisoning caused by bootleg liquor. A spokesman for Jundishapur medical university in Ahvaz, the capital of Khuzestan, said 218 people had been hospitalised there after being poisoned.

The poisonings were caused by "rumours that drinking alcohol can be effective in treating coronavirus," Ali Ehsanpour said.

The deputy prosecutor of Alborz, Mohammad Aghayari, told IRNA the dead had drunk methanol after being "misled by content online, thinking they were fighting coronavirus and curing it."

If ingested in large quantities, methanol can cause blindness, liver damage and death.

Senior member of Iran's Revolutionary Guards killed in Syria

A senior member of Iran's Revolutionary Guards, Farhad Dabirian, was "martyred" in Syria on Friday, Fars news agency reported, without giving details of how he died.

The agency, which is close to the Revolutionary Guards, described Dabirian as a "defender of Sayida Zainab shrine," the holy site south of Damascus, and as a former commander of the Guards in Palmyra, the ancient city in central Syria.

The Guards from other countries including Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq and Lebanon are fighting alongside Syrian President Bashar Al Assad's military in



the nine-year-old civil war.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a UK-based organisation which reports on the war, said a senior Iranian Revolutionary Guards' commander was assassinated in the Sayeda Zeinab area south of Damascus.

Saudi bans shisha over coronavirus fears

Cairo: Saudi authorities have banned cafes and restaurants in the kingdom from serving shisha and tobacco to prevent the spread of the novel coronavirus, Saudi media reported Monday.

Local authorities in several Saudi cities, including the capital Riyadh, have announced the temporary ban as part of precautionary measures against the virus, news portal Ajel said.

Teams from municipalities will make field inspections to ensure the strict compliance with the ban, according to the report.

Saudi Health Minister Tawfik Al Rabih hailed the ban. "Tobacco and the shisha can cause infection transmission as they change hands," the official said.

Fifteen confirmed coronavirus cases have been recorded in Saudi Arabia, which has taken a string of preventive steps against the virus, including a temporary ban on the Umrah trips, closure of educational institutions and suspension of flights to a number of coronavirus-hit countries.