

Iran warns of coronavirus cluster spread, says 71 more dead

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1589466887920182100

Thu, 2020-05-14 11:40

TEHRAN: Iran warned of a possible coronavirus cluster hitting another province on Thursday as it announced 71 new deaths and more than 1,800 infections nationwide.

"We are in situation similar to previous days (in most provinces) save for Khuzestan, which is still in a critical condition, and it seems that North Khorasan may be critical as well," said health ministry spokesman Kianoush Jahanpour.

"If this trend continues, North Khorasan will require more serious measures, too," he added in televised remarks.

North Khorasan province lies in northeastern Iran on the border with Turkmenistan. Khuzestan province in the southwest borders Iraq.

The ministry had on Monday signalled a setback in its efforts to contain the virus in Khuzestan where authorities shut state bodies, banks and non-essential businesses again in around a third of its counties.

Iran stopped publishing provincial figures for the coronavirus last month. Authorities in the southeastern province of Sistan and Baluchistan, which borders Pakistan and Afghanistan, have also warned of a fresh spike in infections.

"We had not seen such an increase in coronavirus infections since" late February, said Ghasem Miri, deputy head of provincial capital Zahedan's medical university.

The total number of people infected in the province had hit 909, of whom 821 had recovered and 59 died, Miri told ILNA news agency on Tuesday.

Miri said the jump was due to the failure of people to observe "social distancing and health protocols."

Iran has deemed more than 150 counties across the country as low-risk from the virus and has allowed them to reopen mosques.

Since April 11, it has allowed a phased reopening of its economy and lifted restrictions on intercity travel.

Iran's deputy health minister also announced on Thursday that athletes in 29 sports – including track and field, tennis and weightlifting – could resume training.

Iraj Harirchi also told ISNA news agency that a decision about Iran's top flight football league would be made on Saturday.

According to health ministry spokesman Jahanpour, the latest deaths brought the official toll to 6,854.

He said 1,808 new cases of COVID-19 infection had been detected, raising the total to 114,533.

Of those hospitalized, 90,539 had recovered and been discharged, while 2,758 were in critical condition.

Iran has struggled to contain its outbreak of the novel coronavirus since announcing its first cases in the Shiite holy city of Qom on February 19. Experts inside and outside the country have voiced skepticism about the official figures, saying the real toll could be much higher.



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[UN envoy Griffiths thanks Arab coalition for Yemen cease-fire extension](#)

Thu, 2020-05-14 17:14

RIYADH: The UN envoy to Yemen Martin Griffiths on Thursday thanked the Arab

coalition for its recent extension of the cease-fire in the country.

Speaking to the United Nations Security Council, Griffiths said negotiations between the Yemeni government and other parties were making “significant progress,” especially with the cease-fire, but that differences on both sides remain regarding the humanitarian and economic solutions.

He added that, despite the constructive efforts from both sides, the people of Yemen were “right to be frustrated about the slow pace,” and said he hoped the negotiations would “soon come to a successful close.”

Griffiths also said that he was alarmed by the Southern Transitional Council’s (STC) declaration in the south and the steps it had taken to make local institutions in Aden answer to them.

He called the situation in southern Yemen “very disturbing,” and urged the Yemeni government and the STC to “urgently” implement the Riyadh agreement.

Yemen’s government said earlier this week that forces would confront an “armed rebellion” by southern forces, in the latest developments of a near month-long standoff between allies in the anti-Houthi alliance. On April 25, the STC declared a plan to move towards self-rule.

Griffiths highlighted the positive steps made by women in Yemen.

“Yemeni women have demonstrated leadership and activism, leading cease-fire calls, calls for prisoners’ release as well as assisting civilians. I reiterate my call that both parties include women in their negotiation delegations and decision-making, in line with National Dialogue outcomes,” he said.

Griffiths said he was concerned about the recent death sentences passed down to journalists in Yemen, and used his address to call for the immediate release of detained journalists.

Yemen’s Prime Minister, Maeen Abdulmalik Saeed, [met with the ambassadors](#) of the five permanent members of the Security Council on Wednesday to discuss the latest security developments, and efforts to bring peace to unify efforts to confront the coronavirus pandemic.



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[Hezbollah leader says Israel turns attention to hitting missile-making sites in Syria](#)

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1589393362105470600

Wed, 2020-05-13 16:42

BEIRUT: Hezbollah leader Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah said on Wednesday that Israel is now concentrating its attacks in Syria on missile-manufacturing sites.

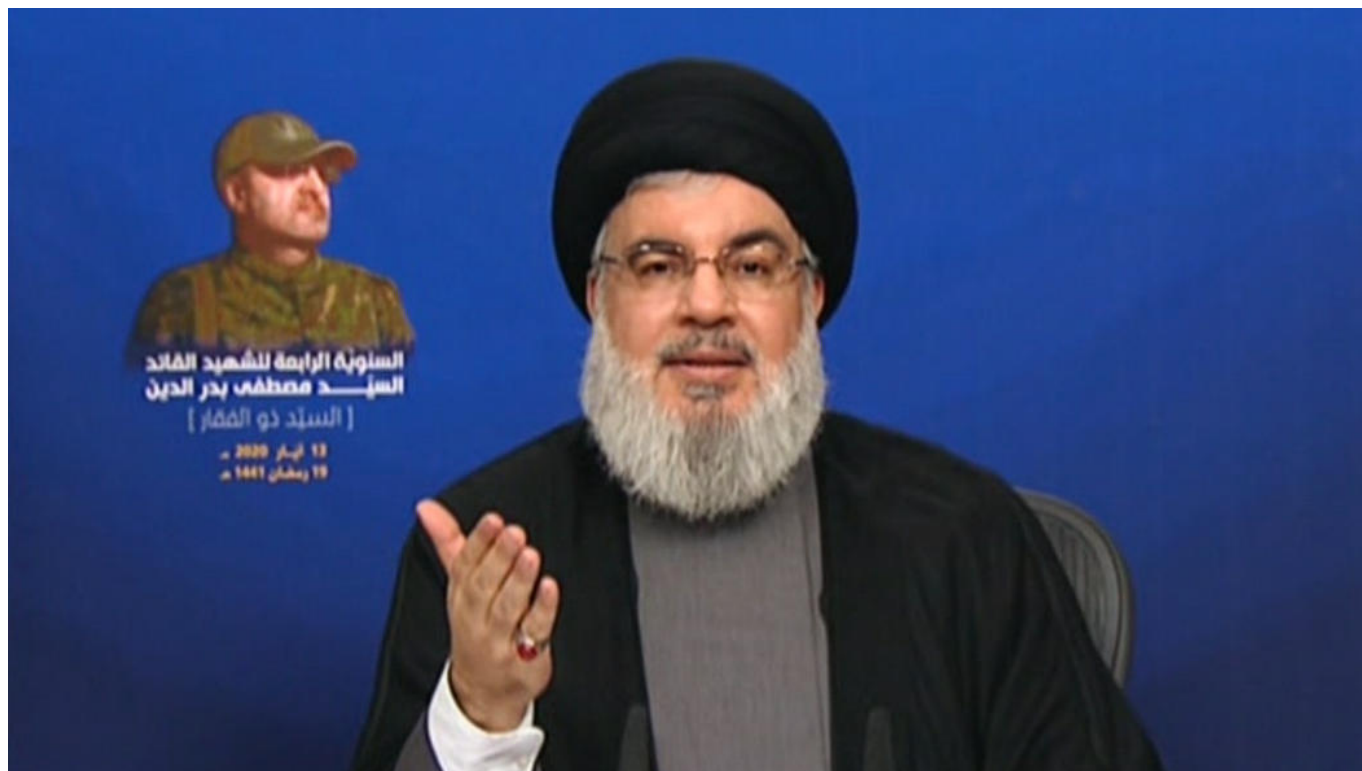
Israel has conducted many raids inside Syria since the start of the civil war in 2011. It sees the presence of Hezbollah and its ally Iran there as a strategic threat.

The heavily armed Lebanese Shiite movement has played a vital role in the war, helping Syrian President Bashar Assad reclaim much of the country.

In rare comments on Israeli attacks in Syria, Nasrallah said that with Assad firmly in control, Israel has turned its attention more recently to striking

Syrian targets for precision missile manufacturing seen as a threat. He denied that Israeli air strikes have pushed either Hezbollah or Iran to retreat from Syria, calling Israel's insistence that they have done so "imaginary victories."

Israeli Defense Minister Naftali Bennett said in April that the Israeli military was working to drive Tehran out of Syria.



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1589393283925465300

Wed, 2020-05-13 14:50

DUBAI: The United Arab Emirates will review the structure and size of its government as part of its strategy for dealing with the effects of the coronavirus pandemic, the country's vice president said on Wednesday. "We may merge ministries and alter bodies. We will make changes. We need a more agile, flexible and speedy government," Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al-Maktoum, who is also the ruler of regional tourism and business hub Dubai, said on Twitter, reporting the outcome of government meetings held Wednesday.



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[Virus-hit Iran reopens mosques for holy Ramadan nights](#)

Wed, 2020-05-13 16:21

TEHAN: In spite of their fears over the coronavirus, hundreds of pious Iranians took advantage of the temporary opening of mosques Wednesday to pray at one of the holiest times of year.

The mask-clad faithful for the most part adhered to social distancing guidelines as they sat in designated areas of Reihanat Al-Hussein mosque, in west Tehran.

Clutching their own prayer mats and Qur'ans, they showed up with their families, including a couple with a baby, and appeared to be in high spirits. Worshippers spilled out into grounds outside the mosque were disinfected by a sanitary worker in a hazmat suit who sprayed them as he walked among them. But some of the gaps between those seated at the back appeared to be too close for comfort, and the Basij militia were on hand to ensure they kept apart.

"Of course, everybody is worried about the disease, even my own family," said one of the worshippers who gave his name only as Mahmoudi.

"When I decided to come they were concerned about me and I promised them to respect the directives," he said.

"So I came and saw that everyone is respecting the (social) distancing, otherwise, I wouldn't have stayed and I'd have gone back home."

Iran reopened the mosques for two hours from midnight for Laylat Al-Qadr, a high point during the fasting month of Ramadan that marks when the Qur'an was revealed to Prophet Muhammad.

The Islamic republic shut its mosques and shrines in March as part of its efforts to contain the Middle East's deadliest outbreak of COVID-19.

The first cases emerged in the Shiite holy city of Qom on February 19 and spread rapidly to all 31 of the country's provinces.

It has gone on to claim nearly 6,800 lives in Iran.

President Hassan Rouhani, whose government has faced criticism for being slow to react to the crisis, praised worshippers for abiding by health guidelines.

"There were concerns about how people would follow health guidelines if mosques were opened, but last night, you found that it was a special ceremony," he said.

"Wherever people participated, they followed all the instructions," he said in televised remarks.

Health Minister Saeed Namaki had sounded a note of caution on Tuesday as he announced the special reopening for three out of the next five nights.

And on Wednesday he admitted it had been a "difficult and risky decision... criticized by some of my colleagues."

"Everywhere people observed the instructions, except in one county where, contrary to our protocols, tea was offered to the participants," he said.

The Qadr ceremony lasts three nights because the exact time of the revelation of the words of God is unknown.

Those at the first gathering overnight at Tehran's Al-Hussein mosque appeared to be exalted at the chance to finally pray after being shut out for more than two months.

"We have brought masks and gloves and everything. I think that if we follow the security and health protocols, then nothing will happen to us and we will be able to continue with this ceremony," said Masoumeh, a housewife.

For Amir Hosein, a private sector worker, it was a chance not to be missed.

"These nights are special for people and I think the government wasn't able to cancel these ceremonies because we go out and pray together: that is the

whole joy of this ceremony.”



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