

Washington imposes new sanctions as Iran's COVID-19 death toll tops 1,000

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19 March 2020

The US government has imposed yet another round of punishing economic sanctions against Iran, as the country confronts one of the worst outbreaks of the global coronavirus pandemic on the planet.

The new measures are aimed at crippling exports by Iran's petrochemical industry to tighten the noose on the country's crumbling economy and starve the population into submission in the hope of effecting regime change. Now Washington is counting not only on hunger, but also death from the deadly new virus.

On Wednesday, the Iranian government announced that the death toll had reached 1,135 people out of 17,161 cases of infection. This marks the third highest number of deaths—after China and Italy—and the highest mortality rate from the disease in the world. As in the US, there are strong suspicions that the official number of infections represents a severe underestimation of the real scope of the disease's spread.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced the new round of sanctions Tuesday in a thuggish address to a State Department press conference. He claimed the export of petrochemical products had been targeted because its revenues could “enable the Iranian regime's violent behavior” and “fund terror and other destabilizing activities, such as the recent rocket attacks on Iraqi and Coalition forces located at Camp Taji in Iraq.”

Dismissing global demands that Washington lift its “maximum pressure” sanctions regime against Iran in the face of the massive humanitarian and worldwide public health crisis provoked by the spread of the coronavirus in the country, Pompeo insisted, “The United States will continue to fully enforce our sanctions.”

He went further, blaming China for the spread of the “Wuhan virus”—a phrase promoted by the American far right in an attempt to stigmatize China and foment xenophobia—and the Iranian government for its spread into Iran.

Pompeo charged that “senior Iranians lied about the Wuhan virus outbreak for weeks,” adding: “The Iranian

leadership is trying to avoid responsibility for their grossly incompetent and deadly governments. The Wuhan virus is a killer and the Iranian regime is an accomplice.”

On these grounds, one would have to indict the Trump administration as an even more criminal “accomplice,” given the US president's continuing denials from late January through February that the coronavirus posed any threat to the American public and his accusing of those who claimed it did of perpetrating a “hoax.”

There is no doubt that Iran's bourgeois-clerical government failed to alert the public to the threat of the coronavirus and institute policies of quarantine when the first deaths were reported on February 19 in Qom, Iran's seventh-largest city and a holy site for Shia Muslims. Among its considerations was an election scheduled for February 21.

With Nowruz, the Persian New Year, coming on Friday, the government has still refrained from imposing strict measures of quarantine. There are reports that roads have been blocked from Tehran to the north, and Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has issued a rare religious ruling barring “unnecessary” trips. Teams were also dispatched to screen travelers leaving major cities.

Meanwhile, the government has released another 85,000 prisoners, on top of 70,000 set free earlier this month in an attempt to prevent the prisons becoming centers for the spread of the virus. This accounts for the overwhelming majority of Iran's prison population.

Clashes were reported between hardline religious factions and police at Shia shrines in Qom that had been closed by order of the government because of their serving as source of the virus' spread.

An Iranian medical doctor speaking on state television Tuesday warned that if the population followed the government's instructions to eliminate unnecessary travel and observed other health guidelines, the death toll could be kept down to 12,000. If they did not, she said, as many as 3.5 million people could die.

There is no question, however, that the sanctions regime imposed by the United States after the Trump administration

unilaterally abrogated the 2015 nuclear agreement between Tehran and the major powers has left Iran ill-equipped to confront the onslaught of the coronavirus.

Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif warned on Twitter Tuesday that US sanctions had "drained Iran's economic resources, impairing ability to fight #COVID19." These punitive measures, he added, "literally kill innocents." Addressing world governments, he stated in relation to the US sanctions, "It is immoral to observe them; doing so has never saved anyone from future US wrath."

Zarif added that Iran suffers from a severe shortage of protective masks, coronavirus testing kits and medical ventilators. "Iranian care personnel are courageously battling COVID-19 on the frontlines. Their efforts are stymied by vast shortages caused by restrictions on our people's access to medicine/equipment," he said.

Washington has responded by claiming it is willing to provide "humanitarian" aid to Iran. This is nothing but hypocrisy. The sanctions regime has prevented Iran from obtaining medicines needed to keep patients suffering from cancer and other diseases alive, not to mention receiving the supplies it needs to confront the coronavirus. The US Treasury Department has gone after companies selling medical supplies to Iran, while the Iranian Central Bank has been blacklisted as a "terrorist" entity, making it impossible for Tehran to conduct normal transactions on the world markets.

China on Monday denounced the US sanctions as "immoral" and demanded that they be lifted. Russia condemned the US blockade against Iran as "inhuman" and said that the sanctions were preventing Iran from countering the spread of the coronavirus.

Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan, meanwhile, told the Associated Press that it was time to lift the US sanctions and that the coronavirus crisis was a "classic example" of where humanitarian considerations should outweigh geopolitical interests.

Iran has made an appeal to the International Monetary Fund for \$5 billion in emergency funding to combat the virus. While the IMF has set up a \$50 billion fund for this purpose, it is unlikely that it will release the money to Tehran. A similar request from Venezuela, which has also been subjected to a US "maximum pressure" campaign, was denied by the fund, which is largely controlled by Washington.

A top administration official told CNN Tuesday that, "This is Iran's Chernobyl," referring to the nuclear meltdown in Ukraine that preceded the Stalinist bureaucracy's dissolution of the Soviet Union. The clear implication is that Washington is salivating over the prospect that a devastating spread and mass death toll from

the coronavirus in Iran can advance its goal of regime change.

Washington's preparations for military confrontation with Iran, meanwhile, continue unabated. For the first time since 2012, the Pentagon has deployed two aircraft carrier-led strike groups in the Persian Gulf region.

US military officials are blaming Iran for rocket attacks that have killed and wounded US and other "coalition" troops at the Iraq's al-Taji base north of Baghdad. The Pentagon has responded to these attacks with airstrikes that have killed both members of the Kataib Hezbollah Shia militia and members of the Iraqi government's regular security forces.

It was assumed that the rocket attacks were carried out in retaliation for the January 3 US drone assassination strike that killed both Gen. Qassem Suleimani, one of the most senior officials in the Iranian government, and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the leader of Kataib Hezbollah and deputy commander of the Popular Mobilization Forces, which constitutes part of Iraq's armed forces.

The chief of the US Central Command, Gen. Kenneth McKenzie, described Kataib Hezbollah as an "Iranian proxy group," suggesting that any attacks on US troops in Iraq were the work of Tehran, despite the overwhelming popular hostility of the Iraqi population to the continued US military occupation and the demand of the Iraqi Parliament that all US and other foreign troops be expelled from the country.

General McKenzie also told a Senate panel last week that the coronavirus crisis could lead the Iranian leadership to launch military attacks. This warning only expressed the Pentagon's own calculations that the public health disaster in Iran could create more favorable conditions for a US war of aggression.



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