Iran: Reopening of schools fuels resurgence of coronavirus

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Iran is recording more than 3,300 new COVID-19 infections a day, almost as high as earlier peaks at the end of March and the beginning of June.

Placing the financial interests of the ruling elite before the lives and needs of workers and peasants, President Hassan Rouhani began reopening the economy in the second half of April, even as Iran was officially reporting more than 1,000 new COVID-19 cases per day.

The latest spike comes three weeks after schools reopened on September 5, following a seven-month closure. In August, more than a million students sat the four-day nationwide university entrance exam despite calls for it to be postponed.

Rouhani dismissed these concerns, saying no student had tested positive for the virus following the exams. This is part of a broader government campaign that has sought to pin the blame for the spread of the disease on Iranians not abiding by safety measures implemented by the authorities.

One of the first countries to be struck by the virus, Iran has had the highest number of cases and deaths in the Middle East. This is in large part because of the devastating impact of decades of US sanctions on the country's health care system, preventing Iran from obtaining medicines and supplies to treat coronavirus cases, cancer patients, and other deadly diseases. According to the health minister, as of August 22, at least 164 medical workers had lost their lives fighting the pandemic.

According to the latest figures, there have been 429,000 reported cases and nearly 25,000 deaths. The capital Tehran appears to be the hardest hit. Deputy health minister Iraj Harirchi, referring to the colour coding system of white, orange/yellow and red regions based on the number of infections and deaths, said "The colour classification doesn't make sense anymore. We no longer have orange and yellow. The entire country is red." He predicted that the death toll would soon reach 45,000.

On Saturday, Masoud Mardani, an infectious diseases specialist and member of the government's coronavirus task force, told the ISNA news agency that about half of all COVID-19 patients in Iran's intensive care units were dying, with the death toll among those on ventilators at 90 percent, meaning that "In all, 10 percent to 12 percent of hospitalised patients are losing their lives."

Other reports indicate that the number of hospitalizations in the major cities has more than tripled, with Payam Tabarsi, head of infectious diseases at Tehran's Masih Daneshvari Hospital, saying, "People are queuing to be admitted." He called on the government to close schools and limit attendance to online classes, saying that in the last few days several students and teachers had been infected.

In July, the head of Tehran's Coronavirus Commission begged the Health Ministry for permission to hire more health care workers and requested soldiers with medical and nursing skills be sent to hospitals.

Iran's health care crisis has worsened the catastrophic economic crisis, triggered by the Trump administration's punitive sanctions, imposed in 2018, after the US scuttled the 2015 Iran nuclear accord, with the aim of crashing its economy and provoking "regime change." The sanctions effectively bar Iran from selling its oil—the lifeblood of the Iranian economy—causing crude oil production to fall to its lowest level in 40 years and oil storage facilities to be filled to capacity.

Last month, oil production was just 1.94 million barrels per day, nearly half that in 2018, with a corresponding fall in revenue. According to Rouhani, oil sales were "slightly more than $20 billion" in the 12 months to March 2020, down from $120 billion in 2011. With the slump in oil prices and demand, this year's revenue will be even lower. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) predicts that the Iranian economy will shrink by 6 percent this

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year.

Last week, Iran's currency, the rial, fell sharply to 273,000 rial per US dollar, as opposed to 35,000 to the dollar in 2015. According to the Statistical Centre for Iran's latest annual report, this has fuelled the rate of inflation that was running at 37 percent for the year ending March 2020, with an alarming food inflation rate of 43 percent—figures widely believed to be a vast underestimate.

Unemployment is running high as the pandemic led to factory and shop layoffs. A report by Iran's parliamentary research body estimates that 6.43 million Iranians could lose their jobs this year. The minimum monthly wage is just $80, despite a family of three needing at least $300 per month to cover the basic cost of living.

These crushing economic conditions have precipitated several waves of strikes and protests by truck drivers, teachers and steel workers. Last November, security forces killed at least 300 people, according to Amnesty International. Dozens of labour activists have been detained, some sentenced to prison and others receiving lashes.

Despite the harsh government intimidation and repression, including executions, there was a wave of strikes by thousands of workers in the oil and petrochemical industries in July and August as well as demonstrations and strikes by industrial and municipal workers, coal miners and health care workers over unpaid wages, poor working conditions and lack of job security. Police in Behbahan fired tear gas into a crowd protesting economic hardships. Workers at the Haft Tapeh sugar factory in the southwestern city of Shush have been on strike for two months demanding unpaid wages, a renewal of their social security benefits and the rehiring of workers fired for protesting.

On Saturday, the Trump administration invoked the "snapback" of United Nations sanctions that were suspended following the 2015 nuclear accord between Tehran and the world's major powers.

On Monday, the Trump administration detailed sanctions and export controls on 27 entities and officials that allegedly support Iran's nuclear, missile, and conventional arms-related activities.

Saudi Arabia's King Salman used his speech at the UN yesterday to back Washington's stance against Iran and to call for the disarming of its ally Hezbollah in Lebanon, saying that Iran had exploited the 2015 nuclear deal "to intensify its expansionist activities, create its terrorist networks, and use terrorism," which had produced nothing but "chaos, extremism, and sectarianism." He added, "Our experience with the Iranian regime has taught us that partial solutions and appeasement did not stop its threats to international peace and security."

These latest unilateral anti-Iranian sanctions come with threats of secondary sanctions against countries trading with Iran, denying them access to the US financial system and markets. These threats are designed to force all the other signatories to the agreement, including Washington's erstwhile European allies, France, Germany and the UK, to fall into line.

On Tuesday, the three countries started to ramp up the pressure on Tehran, summoning the Iranian ambassadors to protest against the detention of dual nationals, its treatment of political prisoners, abuse of human rights, arbitrary detention of activists and oppositionists, and clampdown on free reporting.

The Trump administration has upped its pressure on Hezbollah, slapping sanctions on two former Lebanese cabinet ministers and close allies of Hezbollah, including the top aide to the powerful Shiite Parliament Speaker, Nabih Berri. On Tuesday, in a bid to limit Iran's influence in Iraq, whose annual trade with Iran is estimated at around $12 billion, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo approved a new 60-day waiver on Iranian imports that was much shorter than the previous waivers to force Iraq to reach alternative arrangements with Washington's Gulf allies.

Rouhani insisted that Iran would resist US aggression, following this up with the dispatch of a surveillance drone over the USS Nimitz aircraft carrier that along with several other warships entered the Gulf last week via the Strait of Hormuz, the world's most important chokepoint for oil shipments.

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