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Israel extends travel restrictions to lockdown areas with a high contagion

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Government approves further travel restrictions on virus-hit areas

Bnei Brak first city declared 'restricted area' as coronavirus cases in predominately ultra-Orthodox community surge; host of additional religious communities may soon follow

Ynet| Published: 04.02.20 , 23:03

The government approved a series of emergency directives on Thursday that authorize it to restrict movement in and out of areas with a high contagion rate of coronavirus.

Bnei Brak is the first city to be placed under lockdown and places such as Elad, Modi'in-Ilit, Beitar-Ilit, and Beit Shemesh are soon to follow.

The residents of Bnei Brak will only be allowed to leave the city to receive medical treatment, attend a funeral of a first-degree relative or for legal proceedings.

According to the new regulations, if the government decides to close down an area, it must immediately notify the local authorities in the restricted area, as well as the Knesset committee for coronavirus affairs, and will keep providing essential goods and services within the area.

The lockdown will be valid for a week but can be extended for five days at a time and up to 21 days in total. Any further extension will require the Knesset's approval.

If the circumstances leading to the lockdown of the area cease to exist, the government will immediately notify the local authorities.

The Jerusalem suburb of Kiryat Ye'arim announced that starting Friday at 6am, only registered residents will be allowed to enter the town.

Furthermore, the government approved another directive that requires any Israeli citizen returning from abroad must enter a state-run quarantine facility if they cannot do so in their home or any other alternative location, provided there is available room at the compound. The isolation period will last between 10 and 14 days.

The state will provide food and toiletries to those who will isolate in the state-run facilities.

Any person who fails to self-isolate upon their return will be given a NIS 5,000 fine or a six-month prison sentence.

Enforcement of the regulations will be subject to the necessary authority representatives.

04.02.20 – Th - - -

Israel's virus death 36, cases 6,857, elderly evacuated to hotels outside cities

04.02.20 – Th - - -

Israel's coronavirus death toll rises to 36, cases up to 6,857

Latest fatalities are a 91-year-old man who was hospitalized at Beilinson Hospital and an 84-year-old man who was hospitalized at Shaare Tzedek Hospital

Ynet| Updated: 04.02.20 , 22:23

Health officials reported on Thursday that two more people have died of coronavirus, bringing the national death toll to 36, and the total number of COVID-19 cases in Israel now stands at 6,857.

The latest fatalities are a 91-year-old man who was hospitalized at Beilinson Hospital and an 84-year-old man who was hospitalized at Shaare Tzedek Hospital. Earlier, a 98-year-old woman, who suffered from various underlying health conditions and was hospitalized at Ein Kerem Hospital in Jerusalem, also died of coronavirus complications.

The deceased is the **fourth resident** of Jerusalem's Nofim Tower sheltered living facility to have **died** of complications of coronavirus **after many of the nursing home's tenants have contracted the pathogen.**

Of the latest number, 108 people are currently in serious condition, another 126 people are in moderate condition and the rest display only mild to no symptoms.

A total of 771 people are being treated at hospitals, 710 are hospitalized at hotels requisitioned by the Ministry of Defense to treat coronavirus patients and 3,714 are being treated at home. The situation of **all other patients** is still **being examined.**

At least 338 patients have recovered.

Also on Thursday, Interior Minister Arye Dery and Defense Minister Naftali Bennett have ordered to **evacuate some 4,500 elderly people aged 80** and over from Bnei Brak **to a hotel outside of the city** in order to **protect them** from the rapid spread of coronavirus in the city.

The elderly will be moved to a designated **hotel operated by the IDF** Home Front Command. The rest of the city's elderly population, aged 60-80, will remain in strict home quarantine.

The number of coronavirus patients in the predominantly **ultra-Orthodox city** is nearing 1000 with at least **900 confirmed** diagnoses so far, as **ultra-Orthodox cities continue to record the sharpest rises** in new COVID-19 cases, health officials said Thursday.

First published: 22:21 , 04.02.20

**04.02.20** – Th - - -

**Police require civilians to wear masks in public & dispersed beachgoers and campers**

**04.02.20** – Th - - -

**Police yet to enforce mask directive, citing bureaucracy as cause of delay**

Police still waiting for Justice Ministry document clarifying how to enforce directive; **soldiers help enforce social distancing** in southern **Tel Aviv** due to repeated offenses

Ynet| Published: 04.02.20 , 21:00

Police officials said on Thursday that officers have yet to be instructed to enforce a Health Ministry directive **requiring civilians to wear protective masks when in public** to stave off the spread of coronavirus.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Health Ministry Director-General Moshe Bar-Siman-Tov announced the new directive on Wednesday and Health Ministry Deputy Director-General Dr. Itamar Grotto confirmed on Thursday in an interview with Army Radio that the directive came into effect.

However, police are still waiting for an official document from the Ministry of Justice clarifying how to enforce the directive, under what conditions and what penalty it will carry.

Also on Thursday, 20 soldiers have been assigned to assist police in enforcing social distancing in southern Tel Aviv after large groups of African asylum seekers were seen gathering in breach of Health Ministry regulations.

A vehicle with loudspeakers driving through the area informed the public in English and ring to them as police were on Tigrinya of the restrictions and the importance of adhere to persuade residents of the area of the dangers. The city municipality said they had been closing down local shops and businesses but information to residents in their own language understand the need to relay.

Police officers also dispersed beachgoers and campers near the shores of the Dead Sea.

Dozens were sent away and only a handful of people who live on the beach year-round were allowed to remain.

04.01.20 – We - - -

Tight restrictions will bar gatherings for Passover, Ramadan & Holy Fire ceremony

04.01.20 – We - - -

Holy Land custodian urges Israel to let clerics celebrate Easter in Holy Sepulchre

As Easter draws ever nearer and Israel finds itself in the midst of harsh coronavirus restriction, representatives of the three main Churches in Jerusalem send statement, saying that prayers at the site of Jesus' crucifixion will continue

Reuters| Published: 04.01.20 , 22:24

Easter celebrations should be permitted inside the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, even if only by a small number of clerics abiding by anti-coronavirus guidelines, a senior clergyman said on Wednesday.

Father Francesco Patton, a Franciscan friar who is the Custos of the Holy Land for the Roman Catholic church, urged the Israeli government to allow freedom of worship at the site which is the focal point of Holy Week.

Israel has imposed tight restrictions on public gatherings to curb the spread of the virus, on Monday barring gatherings of more than two people who are not in the same family, with few exceptions.

With Easter approaching, the Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox and Roman Catholic authorities who share custody of the Holy Sepulchre issued a joint statement last week saying prayers "will continue" at the traditional site of Jesus' crucifixion, burial and resurrection.

But discussions continue about how to ensure safety and continued worship during the most important festival in the Christian calendar, which Catholics celebrate on April 12 and Greek Orthodox a week later.

"I think that at this moment our community living in the Holy Sepulchre has the duty and the task to pray in this place for all those who are living around the world," Patton told Reuters.

"We think that to pray is not something useless, we think that it is something that can really change the situation."

The Holy Sepulchre lies at the heart of the Christian Quarter of Jerusalem's walled Old City. Its doors were shut to the public on March 25.

Patton said it would be impossible to carry out the annual Palm Sunday procession in Jerusalem on April 5 in anything like the normal manner, with thousands of pilgrims walking from the Mount of Olives to an Old City which now lies deserted.

But he said services could be filmed and live-streamed worldwide for those unable to attend, and held out hope that the bishops of each church would be able safely to mark the "most important" celebrations.

These include Good Friday, Easter Sunday and the - usually - crowded Greek Orthodox ceremony of the Holy Fire, symbolizing the resurrection.

"We have to give to Caesar what is of Caesar and we have to give to God what is of God," said Patton. "We respect what is the role and what is the duty of the public and civil power and at the same time we think that the different civil authorities have to respect what is the right of God."

Israel has imposed a partial lockdown, with police and soldiers enforcing the Ministry of Health's restrictions requiring people to stay near their homes. Religious leaders of other faiths have also taken precautions.

Islamic authorities last month suspended all Muslim prayers around Al-Aqsa Mosque. At the Western Wall, up to 10 people are permitted to pray with worshippers keeping 2 meters apart. But the chief rabbi of the site instructed them not to kiss the stones.

Police spokesman Micky Rosenfeld said it was too early to know the arrangements for upcoming religious holidays of all religions.

"It all depends on the health regulations," he said. "If the situation is going to be the same with no public gatherings... nothing will be going on, not Passover, not Ramadan and not the Holy Fire ceremony. We will have to wait and see."

04.01.20 – We - - -

All Passengers arriving to Israel must be quarantined at dedicated hotels

04.01.20 – We - - -

Passengers to Israel from U.S. worry they may have been exposed to COVID-19

Passengers say they were not tested or had to report any medical condition before boarding flight; upon arrival, all aboard were told to quarantine despite PM's instructions they be held in coronavirus dedicated hotel

Itay Blumenthal| Updated: 04.01.20 , 18:56

Passengers on United Airlines flight UA90 from New Jersey to Ben Gurion Airport Wednesday worried that some of those on the flight may have coronavirus.

One of the passengers who spoke with Ynet said that a man from Brooklyn boarded that plane despite being ordered to remain in quarantine, while he is waiting for his COVID-19 test results.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu instructed the Ministry of Defense on Wednesday to isolate all arrivals to the country from overseas in designated facilities as part of the effort to curb the spread of coronavirus.

The Prime Minister's Office said that the directive would take effect immediately.

According to some reports, officials were considering submitting all arrivals from overseas to a test for the virus.

Passengers on the United Airlines flight said they were not tested before boarding and were not obligated to hand in any statement regarding their current medical condition.

The state of New York has been the epicenter of the virus outbreak in the United States.

There are over 75,000 confirmed cases and over 1,700 deaths nationwide.

The city of New York is the focus of the major outbreak in the state of New York, with a serious spread of the disease being recorded in ultra-Orthodox neighborhoods in Brooklyn. About 19,000 patients were diagnosed with COVID -19 in the state of New Jersey.

"One of the passengers said he's sick, but he doesn't know if he has coronavirus and he's waiting for test results," said one of the passengers on the plane, utilizing the Wi-Fi on the flight.

"I asked the flight attendants, but they have no idea what to do," said that same person.

"They said they can't do anything and that this person is putting everyone else on the flight in danger. There were some 200 people on board, including babies and the elderly.

It's completely irresponsible to not address this."

"Someone on the flight coughed and it scared the whole plane," said a different passenger.

"He fell asleep with a mask on his face. I asked his friends if he's sick, and they said they don't know but that 'God decides all.' Everybody is at risk here and none of the crew cares."

"The flight crew said they can't do anything and that the flight will continue as usual," said another passenger.

The passengers were met upon landing in Israel by officials in white protective suits who took their temperatures. They were then gathered — at a safe distance from each other — and told to self-quarantine despite instructions from Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that all arriving in the country must be quarantined at dedicated hotels.

03.31.20 – Tu - - -

Israel airstrike on Syria fired the missiles while flying in Lebanese airspace

03.31.20 – Tu - - -

Syria: Air defenses down missiles from Israeli warplanes

State TV says IAF jets opened fire on Homs region while flying in Lebanese airspace, targeted unspecified army position; Beirut residents say they heard sound of warplanes in air shortly before airstrikes were reported

Daniel Salami, Liad Osmo, AP | Published: 03.31.20, 22:25

Syria's state-run SANA media outlet said that the country's air defenses opened fire Tuesday night on missiles launched from Israeli warplanes on the central province of Homs, shooting down some of them, state media said.

State TV said the warplanes fired the missiles while flying in Lebanese airspace.

Play Video

Syrian media reports IAF strike in Homs area

The outlet said the warplanes targeted a Syrian army position without saying where exactly.

It added that some of the missiles were shot down.

The Lebanese pro-Hezbollah Al Mayadeen channel reported that the attack was aimed at "military sites east of Homs." No injuries have so far been reported.

The UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said that, "the Israeli Air Force has launched an attack on Shayrat airfield with more than eight missiles."

SANA quoted a Syrian military official as saying: "Around 20:25, the Israeli Air Force launched several missiles at eastern Homs from Lebanon's airspace. Our air defense systems soon responded to the hostile missiles and intercepted a number of them. Now we are inspecting the results of this aggression."

Residents of the Lebanese capital Beirut heard the sound of warplanes in the air shortly before the airstrikes were reported.

There was no immediate comment from Israel.

In recent years, Israel has repeatedly carried out airstrikes in Syria against targets belonging to Iran and its regional proxies.

One airstrike in February killed two members of the Palestinian terror group Islamic Jihad, which is backed by Iran.

04.02.20 – Th - - -

## Islam & al-Qaida see virus focus as an opening for renewed violence

04.02.20 – Th - - -

### Extremists see global chaos from virus as an opportunity

With most of the world's nations channeling their efforts to curb spread of COVID-19, militant groups see this shift in focus as an opening for renewed violence

Associated Press| Published: 04.02.20 , 17:05

Both the Islamic State group and al-Qaida see the coronavirus as a threat, but some of their fighters also see the upheaval from the pandemic as an opportunity to win over more supporters and strike harder than before.

Messages from the Islamic extremist groups show concern about the virus mixed with bravado, asserting that it is punishment for non-Muslims while also urging followers to repent and take care of themselves.

Al-Qaida suggested in a statement Tuesday that non-Muslims use their time in quarantine to learn about Islam.

But in a sharp commentary in its al-Naba newsletter in mid-March, IS urged followers to show no mercy and launch attacks in this time of crisis.

In a commentary Tuesday, the International Crisis Group warned that the pandemic threatens the global solidarity that is key to fighting extremists.

“It is almost certainly correct that COVID-19 will handicap domestic security efforts and international counter-ISIS cooperation, allowing the jihadists to better prepare spectacular terror attacks,” it said.

Though analysts said it was too soon to say which attacks can be blamed on militants exploiting coronavirus, Islamic extremists in late March carried out their deadliest assault yet against the military of Chad, a significant contributor to Africa’s growing counterterrorism efforts, killing at least 92 soldiers near the border with Nigeria and Niger.

In Egypt, two military officials reported a spike in IS attacks in March in the restive northern part of the Sinai Peninsula but security forces foiled at least three other major assaults. The officials spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to brief the media.

While Syria and Iraq have seen no uptick in attacks by IS since the virus spread there, the pandemic has prompted the U.S.-led coalition to halt training activities in Iraq amid a planned pullout from several bases.

There are signs elsewhere that the U.S., British and other militaries are pulling back because of the virus, leaving a possible opening for the extremists.



That's a danger in Africa's hot spots of the Sahel, the Lake Chad region and Somalia, where the U.S. military already worried allies in recent months by contemplating cuts to focus on threats from China and Russia.

"Any state that was interested in pulling back in Africa will take the opportunity to do so," said Clionadh Raleigh, executive director of the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, which tracks extremists' activities worldwide. "That will be unbelievably bad."

A U.S. Africa Command spokeswoman, Lt. Christina Gibson, told The Associated Press that "while the size and scope of some AFRICOM activities have been adjusted to ensure the safety and protection of forces — both U.S. and partner nation — our commitment to Africa endures." She did not give details of affected operations but said AFRICOM still has about 5,200 forces on the continent at any given time.

The British army mission in Kenya, which provides counterterrorism training and other skills, this week announced that all army families are returning to the U.K. because of the virus.

But France's largest overseas military mission, Barkhane in West Africa's sprawling Sahel region south of the Sahara Desert, is keeping its 5,100 troops there, the French Defense Ministry said. A pro-al-Qaida French organization issued a statement Tuesday urging French forces to stay home and save lives instead.

African military units, already stretched thin and under attack, are likely to take protective measures as the virus threatens their ranks.

In Nigeria, which has struggled against the Boko Haram extremist group and an assertive IS-linked offshoot, the military has called for suspending much of its activities including large gatherings and training.

A leaked memo signed by the Nigerian army's policy chief says its vehicles might have to be used for mass burials or transferring the sick to hospitals as the virus spreads.

While security forces are targets, under-guarded prisons could be too, said Laith Alkhouri, a counterterrorism adviser who researches extremists in West Africa. Both IS and al-Qaida-linked fighters have turned the Sahel into Africa's most urgent extremism crisis, and even have engaged in some unprecedented cooperation.

Their fighters are likely to exploit the pandemic by accusing governments of mismanaging the crisis to try to win popular support, he said.

Alkhouri said that under another scenario, **individuals may believe that only religion can keep them safe from the virus** "and ignore scientific advice, which could lead to an increase in infections."

Some extremist groups are showing signs that, like the rest of the world, they are trying to understand the coronavirus and respond.

In **Somalia**, the al-Qaida-linked al-Shabab held a rare five-day meeting of its leaders in March that discussed the virus. In a communique, the group recognized its "emergency threat" to the world, including Muslims.

An al-Shabab spokesman later told the AP it was **too soon to comment on whether the group would heed a U.N. plea to halt attacks**, which have continued, or whether it would allow health workers access to areas it controls.

In **Afghanistan**, the Taliban have gone even further, putting out videos on disinfection and photos of its fighters handing out face masks and soap. It also has offered security guarantees to any aid group assisting victims of the virus or helping to stop its spread.

Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahed told the AP that “if, God forbid, the outbreak happens in an area where we control the situation, then we can stop fighting in that area.”

04.02.20 – Th - - -

**UN registers 58 Palestine camps that blame aid agency for not enough help**

04.02.20 – Th - - -

**Packed Palestinian refugee camps face grave threat if coronavirus spreads**

Most camps across the West Bank, Gaza, Lebanon, Syria and Jordan are registered under UNRWA, a Palestinian aid agency that have been **cash-strapped after U.S.**, its biggest donor, **halted its annual payment of \$360 million**

Reuters| Published: 04.02.20 , 15:44

Malka Abu Aker has seen her crowded refugee camp in the West Bank swell year upon year since fleeing there over 70 years ago, with the arrival of new generations and those escaping successive Mideast conflicts.

But with the coronavirus spreading locally, the 73-year-old worries that her congested Palestinian camp is primed for contagion, and **blames the UN's** cash-strapped Palestinian aid agency for not doing enough to help.

"(UNRWA) is not sanitizing the camp, and they are not cleaning the camp in efforts against this epidemic," Abu Aker said in Bethlehem's Deheisheh camp, referring to the U.N. agency which **provides services to 5.6 million Palestinian refugees.**

Nearly a third of those refugees live in **58 UNRWA-registered camps across the West Bank, Gaza, Lebanon, Syria and Jordan.**

"I have lived through many troubles ... but these days are the toughest I have ever seen," said Abu Aker, who fled a village in West Jerusalem to escape fighting during the 1948 Arab-Israeli war.

From the packed beachfront camps of Gaza to the urban sprawl in south Beirut, Palestinian refugees fear that the already dwindling aid they receive from UNRWA could fall further as the health crisis persists, and donors shift priorities.

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, UNRWA's full name - was created by the U.N. General Assembly 70 years ago to deal with the hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees who were driven from their homes or fled the conflict surrounding Israel's 1948 creation.

UNRWA has faced budget difficulties for years amid donor fatigue and other conflicts in Syria and Yemen. But its financial troubles escalated after 2018, when the United States, its largest donor, halted its annual aid of \$360 million.

Its challenges were compounded by an investigation last year into misconduct allegations, which saw the United States and Israel intensify criticism of the agency.

The probe led to the departure of senior officials including UNRWA's Commissioner-General, who denied wrongdoing and said the agency was the victim of a political campaign.

Despite its troubles, UNRWA last year secured a three-year renewal of its mandate by the United Nations. But soon afterward came an unexpected challenge: coronavirus.

It launched flash funding appeals, saying it needed \$14 million over an initial three-month period to confront the illness in its camps.

The crisis comes "while UNRWA is facing the most severe financial crisis in its history," spokeswoman Tamara Alrifai told Reuters at the agency's headquarters in Amman.

But she said the agency has already taken precautionary measures, including and closing all UNRWA-run schools and delivering medicine and food aid directly to refugees' homes to reduce crowds at distribution centers.

Disinfection underway in Damascus Jaramana refugee camp

Disinfection at closed UNRWA school underway in Damascus Jaramana refugee camp  
(Photo: Reuters)

"We are looking at whether it is possible to turn (UNRWA facilities) into places where people can isolate themselves" in the event of an outbreak, Alrifai said.

At least 34 Palestinian refugees in the West Bank have contracted the illness, six in Gaza and one in Lebanon, according to UNRWA.

In the sunless alleys of Gaza's Beach refugee camp, home to nearly 90,000 Palestinians, medical workers dressed in head-to-toe protective gear sprayed disinfectant on U.N. vehicles last week and loaded wooden carts with aid for distribution.

One refugee, Mohammad Al-Taramsi, said deliveries to people's homes would help stave off contagion but worried that aid to more than a million refugees in the Gaza Strip might be reduced.

"Donor countries are busy with the pandemic, and resolving their own economic situations," Taramsi, 57, said.

In the Jaramana refugee camp southeast of Damascus, some Palestinians reported little by way of protection against the virus in the camp that has ballooned since the start of Syria's civil war.

"We didn't receive any aid at all," said Talal Abou Ghnemeh, 42. "All we have are initiatives by local political factions, who sanitize the camp. We see nothing from UNRWA."

In Lebanon, children played soccer in an open area of Beirut's Shatila refugee camp. Usually, busy shops were mostly shuttered due to virus concerns.

Abou Hamze, 54, said this meant **refugee communities could lose their meager incomes.**

"Those who run computer, CDs or electric shops as their **business** to feed their families, they now **can't open**," he said.

04.01.20 – We - - -

Bernie Sanders urged Mike Pompeo to lift Iran sanctions obstructing medicine

04.01.20 – We - - -

Sanders urges U.S. to lift Iran sanctions to ease coronavirus 'suffering'

The Jewish senator appeals to in a tweet to Pompeo and Mnuchin telling them to put aside 'our countries' disputes'; the Democratic presidential candidate was joined by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Ilan Omar; Iran's leader says U.S. missed a chance 'to apologize'

AFP,Reuters| Published: 04.01.20 , 15:44

Democratic presidential candidate Bernie Sanders has urged the United States to lift sanctions on Iran, among the countries hit the hardest by the novel coronavirus.

Iran's death toll from the COVID-19 has reached 3,036, with 138 deaths in the past 24 hours, Health Ministry spokesman Kianush Jahanpur told state TV on Wednesday, adding that the country had 47,593 infected cases.

The Vermont senator tweeted on Saturday addressed Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Treasury Secretary Steve Mnuchin in a tweet, telling them that pandemics "know no borders."

"Let us put aside our countries' disputes and lift sanctions to reduce human suffering," wrote the senator. "Coronavirus has killed 2,600 in Iran, but U.S. sanctions are obstructing medicine and aid from getting in." Sanders said.

Bernie Sanders

Coronavirus has killed 2,600 in Iran, but U.S. sanctions are obstructing medicine and aid from getting in.@SecPompeo and @stevenmnuchin1 : Pandemics know no borders. Let us put aside our countries' disputes and lift sanctions to reduce human suffering.

[https://www.huffpost.com/entry/trump-sanctions-iran-coronavirus\\_n\\_5e831295c5b603fbdf490a1d?st1 ...](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/trump-sanctions-iran-coronavirus_n_5e831295c5b603fbdf490a1d?st1...)

Lawmakers Ask Trump To Suspend Sanctions To Help Iran Fight Coronavirus  
U.S. policy stymies Iran's access to medicine and vital equipment, 32 members of Congress say in a letter shared exclusively with HuffPost.

The Jewish senator was joined by other U.S. lawmakers, who have also been vocal about easing the restrictions on the Islamic Republic, including Congresswomen Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Ilan Omar, as well as Sander's previous democratic presidential candidate rival Elizabeth Warren.

Iran's president, meanwhile, said that with the advent of the coronavirus, the United States had missed a historic opportunity to lift sanctions on his country, though the penalties had not hampered its fight against the infection.

On Tuesday, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo raised the possibility that Washington might consider easing sanctions on Iran and other nations to help fight the epidemic, but gave no concrete sign it plans to do so.

"The United States lost the best opportunity to lift sanctions," Hassan Rouhani said in a televised cabinet meeting. "It was a great opportunity for Americans to apologize ... and to lift the unjust and unfair sanctions on Iran."

"Americans could have used this opportunity and told the Iranian nation that they are not against them," Rouhani said. "Their hostility (towards Iranians) is obvious."

03.27.20 – Fr - - -

Iran fake cure drinking Methanol killed 300, can be punished with fines & 80 lashes

03.27.20 – Fr - - -

In Iran, false belief a poison fights virus kills hundreds

300 people have been killed and more than 1,000 sickened so far by ingesting methanol across the Islamic Republic, where drinking alcohol is banned and where those who do rely on bootleggers

Associated Press| Published: 03.27.20 , 19:59

Standing over the still body of an intubated 5-year-old boy wearing nothing but a plastic diaper, an Iranian health care worker in a hazmat suit and mask begged the public for just one thing: Stop drinking industrial alcohol over fears about the new coronavirus.

The boy, now blind after his parents gave him toxic methanol in the mistaken belief it protects against the virus, is just one of the hundreds of victims of an epidemic inside the pandemic now gripping Iran.

Iranian media reports nearly 300 people have been killed and more than 1,000 sickened so far by ingesting methanol across the Islamic Republic, where drinking alcohol is banned and where those who do rely on bootleggers. It comes as fake remedies spread across social media in Iran, where people remain deeply suspicious of the government after it downplayed the crisis for days before it overwhelmed the country.

"The virus is spreading and people are just dying off, and I think they are even less aware of the fact that there are other dangers around," said Dr. Knut Erik Hovda, a clinical toxicologist in Oslo who studies methanol poisoning and fears Iran's outbreak could be even worse than reported. "When they keep drinking this, there's going to be more people poisoned."

For most people, the new coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough that clear up in two to three weeks. For some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness, including pneumonia, or death.

The pandemic has swept across the world, overwhelming hospitals, crippling economies and forcing governments to restrict the movements of billions of people. Particularly hard hit has been Iran, home to 80 million people.

As of now, there is no known cure for COVID-19, the illness caused by the virus. Scientists and doctors continue to study the virus and search for effective medicines and a vaccine.

But in messages forwarded and forwarded again, Iranian social media accounts in Farsi falsely suggested a British school teacher and others cured themselves of the coronavirus with whiskey and honey, based on a tabloid story from early February. Mixed with messages about the use of alcohol-based hand sanitizers, some wrongly believed drinking high-proof alcohol would kill the virus in their bodies.

The Islamic Republic has reported over 29,000 confirmed cases and more than 2,200 deaths from the virus, the highest toll of any country in the Middle East. International experts also fear Iran may be under-reporting its cases, as officials for days played down the virus ahead of a parliamentary election.

That fear of the virus, coupled with poor education and internet rumors, saw dozens sickened by drinking bootleg alcohol containing methanol in Iran's southwestern Khuzestan province and its southern city of Shiraz. Videos aired by Iranian media showed patients with IVs stuck in their arms, laying on beds otherwise nee

ded for the fight against the coronavirus, including the intubated 5-year-old boy. Iranian media also reported cases in the cities of Karaj and Yazd.

In Iran, the government mandates that manufacturers of toxic methanol add artificial color to their products so the public can tell it apart from ethanol, the **kind of alcohol that can be used in cleaning wounds**. Ethanol is also the kind of alcohol found in alcoholic beverages, though its production is illegal in Iran.

Some **bootleggers in Iran use methanol, adding a splash of bleach to mask the added color** before selling it as drinkable. Sometimes it is mixed with consumable alcohol to stretch the supply, other times it comes as methanol, falsely advertised as drinkable, Hovda said. Methanol also can contaminate traditionally fermented alcohol.

**Methanol cannot be smelled or tasted in drinks**. It causes delayed organ and brain damage. Symptoms include chest pain, nausea, hyperventilation, blindness, and even coma.

"It is rumored that alcohol can wash and sanitize the digestive system," said Dr. Javad Amini Saman in Iran's western city of Kermanshah, where dozens have been hospitalized, "That is very wrong."

Even before the outbreak, **methanol poisoning had taken a toll in Iran**. One academic study found methanol poisoning sickened 768 people in Iran between September and October 2018 alone, killing 76.

Other Muslim nations that ban their citizens from drinking also see such methanol poisoning, although Iran appears to be the only one in the pandemic so far to turn toward it as a **fake cure**. In Buddhist Cambodia, police said they seized 4,200 liters (1,100 gallons) of methanol from a man who unwittingly planned to make toxic hand sanitizer because of the virus outbreak.

Muslim **drinkers in Iran can be punished with cash fines and 80 lashes**. However, minority Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians can drink alcoholic beverages in private.

While police occasionally announce alcohol busts, the trade-in nontoxic alcohol also continues. Locally made Iranian arak from fermented raisins, known as Aragh sagi, sells for \$10 for a 1.5-liter bottle. Imported vodka sells for \$40 a bottle.

"Every year during Nowruz, or the Persian New Year holidays that begin March 21, my customers double," said Rafik, an Iranian-Armenian who makes vodka in the basement of his Tehran home. He spoke on the condition that only his first name be used for fear of arrest. "This year, because of corona, it jumped up by four- or five-fold."

Farhad, a self-described heavy drinker who lives in central Tehran, said alcohol remains easy to find for those looking for it.

"Even you can find it offered when you are walking down the street," he said.

Since 1979, Iran's 40 alcohol factories have seen their production changed to pharmaceutical needs and sanitizers. Others had been left idle, like the abandoned Shams alcohol factory east of Tehran.

But now, in a time when even some mosques in Iran hand out high-proof alcohol as a sanitizer, officials plan to start work again at Shams to produce 22,000 liters of 99% alcohol a day.