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Iran's Reaction to Coronavirus has Become a Danger for the World

By Editorial Board

THE CORONAVIRUS poses a test for any government, challenging the ability of leaders to carry out necessary countermeasures while maintaining public trust. In China, trust wasn't a high priority, but once the country swung into action, the containment effort was massive. Iran presents a different and worrying scenario: a government in denial, a people cynical and distrustful, and a burgeoning infection. Strictly from a health point of view, Iran has become a dangerous epicenter for covid-19, a hazard not only for its population but also the world.

Iran's leaders seem to have taken little personal precaution. A top Iranian health official, Iraj Harirchi, was telling people the situation was being dealt with while sweating and coughing on colleagues and his audience without wearing a face mask; he had contracted the virus. Then Mohammad Mirmohammadi, 71, an adviser to Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, died after contracting the virus. Masoumeh Ebtekar, Iran's vice president, then announced she is ill; according to Graeme Wood writing in the Atlantic, she met with President Hassan Rouhani and his cabinet last week, potentially exposing the entire senior leadership to the disease. According to state media, 23 members of parliament have already contracted the virus.

Another negative sign is the lack of candor. The BBC Persian service has reported, based on medical sources, that deaths in Iran are six times higher than what Iran has been saying in public. As of Feb. 28, the BBC said there were 210 deaths when Iran was reporting 34. As of Tuesday, Iran reported 77 deaths and 2,336 infections. If that is true, it would indicate a much more lethal variant of the coronavirus, more than a 5 percent

fatality rate, compared to 2 percent in China and less elsewhere. Much more likely, Iran has been underreporting and undercounting the number of nonlethal infections, which may be in the tens of thousands, and spreading through the notorious Evin Prison where westerners and Iranians both are held. As in China, the Iranian authorities were slow to raise alarms about the spread of the virus in February, perhaps because of the political calendar: The anniversary of Iran's revolution was Feb. 11, and parliamentary elections were Feb. 21. These were critical weeks when rapid response to the virus should have been launched.

The outbreak appears to be located in the ancient city of Qom, a center of Shiite learning that draws visitors from all over the world. Iranian officials are now spraying disinfectant and taking countermeasures, but they are late. Mr. Rouhani said health recommendations should be followed "but we must all continue our work and activities, because it is one of the enemies' plots to spread fear in our country and close down the country."

The strict sanctions imposed by the United States on Iran have been severely crimping its economy, and the outbreak ought to lead U.S. officials to look for ways to extend humanitarian relief and expertise in fighting the disease. As the world has seen, coronavirus unchecked anywhere is a danger everywhere.