



Iran's Coronavirus Crisis Continues

July 23, 2020 **Ilan I. Berman** *Al-Hurra Digital*

Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Global Health; Iran

In the early stages of the global coronavirus outbreak this spring, Iran quickly emerged as one of the countries hardest hit by the pandemic. Since then, however, Iranian authorities have taken pains to downplay the extent of the domestic disruption that has been caused by the disease, and moved early to reopen the national economy. It is becoming increasingly clear, however, that the results of these policies have been nothing short of ruinous.

On July 18th, Iranian president Hassan Rouhani gave a public address in which he disclosed publicly that, according to internal Iranian government tallies, as many as 25 million people – or close to one-third of the nation's population of nearly 85 million – have been infected with COVID-19 to date, and some 70,000 have died of the disease. "A report from the research department of the health ministry has assessed that 25 million Iranians have been infected with the disease so far," the Iranian president said in comments carried by state media sources. Moreover, according to Rouhani, the worst still lay ahead; in the near future, he predicted, hospitalizations will be "twice as many as we have seen in the last 150 days."

Rouhani's revelation demolishes the comparatively rosy claims regarding the coronavirus that the Iranian regime has attempted to advance since this spring. As of late July, estimates from Iran's Health Ministry and other official sources had boasted that fewer than 300,000 Iranians had contracted the disease, and less than 14,000 had succumbed to it. Opposition elements have long suspected that these figures were gross underestimations of the true impact of the pandemic on the Islamic Republic. Rouhani has helped prove them correct.

Rouhani's dire prediction of a second coronavirus wave, and a corresponding spike in new infections and deaths, is also noteworthy. Earlier this month, for instance, the country's health ministry disclosed that Iran was already facing a critical shortage of medical personnel and hospital facilities. But that situation is likely to get much, much worse in the near future. In his July 18th address, Rouhani indicated that as many as 35 million more citizens could contract the disease in the weeks ahead. If that happens, it would mean that 70 percent of the entire country (60 of 85 million Iranians) has ended up falling prey to the pandemic.

That, in turn, reflects a governmental failure of monumental proportions. From the outset, Iran's official response to the coronavirus has been far more political than remedial. In the early stages of the pandemic, authorities dithered in quarantining the country's religious centers, failed to close off avenues of potential infection from abroad, and chose to reopen the national economy far too early. At the same time, regime authorities rejected at least some offers of aid (including from the United States), cooked up conspiracy theories regarding the origins of the virus, and launched a massive disinformation campaign designed to cover up their own deficient response to the disease.

The consequences were truly disastrous, and put the country on its current trajectory of mass infection and mortality.

Predictably, however, Iran's regime now appears to be far more interested in damage control than in a serious national response to the disease. In the wake of Rouhani's inconvenient revelations, the country's Health Ministry has sought to downplay the staggering figures as being over-broad, and including "mildly affected patients who... did not need to seek medical advice."

Maybe so, but the overall picture is damning nonetheless. Six months into the global pandemic, Iranian authorities appear to have concluded that they don't have the capacity – or the competence – to effectively combat the disease. Instead, they are now contenting themselves with simply muddling through until the virus runs its course. And, as always, the victims of this failure will end up being the Iranian people themselves.