Coronavirus Update: Infections Have Now Spread To The Middle East

KEY POINTS

- Four people have died from the virus in Iran and 18 cases have been confirmed
- Most cases in Iran were linked to the city of Qom, where the Chinese are building a solar power plant
- Lebanon reported its first case of the virus — a woman returning from Qom

Health authorities in Iran said on Friday that two elderly people died from the coronavirus that first emerged in China, while a total of 13 new cases have been confirmed in the Islamic Republic.

On the whole, four people have died from the virus in Iran and 18 cases have been confirmed.

Kianoush Jahanpour, a spokesman for the health ministry, said the 13 new cases were all linked to the city of Qom which is located about 80 miles south of the capital Teheran. Jahanpour said four of the infected people have been hospitalized in Teheran, and two were under care in the northern province of Gilan.

Minoo Mohrez, an Iranian health ministry official, speculated the virus might have originated in "Chinese workers who work in Qom and traveled to China." A Chinese company has been constructing a solar power plant in Qom.

Iranian authorities have closed all schools and Shiite seminaries in Qom. Health officials have also called for the suspension of all religious assemblies in the city.

Mohrez further said that the virus may have spread to other parts of Iran.

"Based on existing reports, the spread of the coronavirus started in Qom and with [respect] to people's travels [the virus] has now reached several cities in the

country, including Tehran, Babol, Arak, Isfahan, Rasht, and other cities. And it is possible that it exists in all cities in Iran."

But no clear link has yet been established between virus infections in Iran and the Chinese city of Wuhan, where the epidemic is believed to have originated.

The World Health Organization called the coronavirus outbreak in Iran "very worrisome." "The cases that we see in the rest of the world, although the numbers are small, but not linked to Wuhan or China, it's very worrisome," said Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, director-general of WHO. "These dots are actually very concerning."

Iran said it recently evacuated 60 Iranian students from Wuhan, China, the epicenter of the virus epidemic. The students were quarantined upon their return but discharged after 14 days without any reports of infection.

Iran has suspended all passenger flights to and from China, permitting only cargo flights, but has not yet prohibited its citizens from traveling to China.

Iran's civil aviation spokesman Reza Jafarzadeh said "cargo flights, if necessary, are under supervision, and controls imposed by the health ministry are [being] carried out."

Dr. Jaouad Mahjour, assistant director of emergency preparedness at WHO, said Iran's health care system has the "basic capacity" to detect and contain the coronavirus.

Lebanon has also reported its first case of the virus. Health Minister Hamad Hassan said on Friday the patient is a 45-year-old woman who arrived in Beirut on Thursday on a flight from Qom in Iran.

He added that the woman was in "good health" and that the ministry is investigating two other people suspected of infection. All three were quarantined at the Rafik Hariri government hospital in Beirut.

Turkey's Health Minister Fahrettin Koca said officials have begun to screen travelers coming from Iran at the borders and banning entry to anyone who show signs of the illness. Koca also said Iranians who have visited Qom in the past 14 days will be denied entry into Turkey,

Qom is a very important city for Shiite Muslims, attracting millions of visitors, pilgrims and students every year from Iran, Iraq, Pakistan and Afghanistan, Azerbaijan and other countries with significant Shiite populations.

Ali Tabatabaei, a journalist in Qom, said local authorities "have been taking the infection seriously and up till now three hospitals have been allocated to take in patients affected by the virus. Leave for all physicians who work for the government has been canceled and all hospitals are on red alert."

Iraq, which has not yet reported any cases of the virus, has suspended visas on arrival for Iranian passport holders and banned direct flights between the two nations.

Iraq's most prominent Shiite cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, called on the government to prepare for the virus during his weekly sermon on Friday. "The level of preparations should match the level of the threat," he said.

The United Arab Emirates reported two new cases of the virus on Friday, raising its total count of infections to 11.

UAE's health ministry said the two new cases comprised a 34-year-old Filipino and a 39-year-old Bangladeshi national both of whom had contact with a Chinese citizen who had already been diagnosed with the virus. Most of the other confirmed cases were Chinese citizens.

Also on Friday, Israel reported its first case of the virus — one of 11 Israelis who flew home after being quarantined on a cruise ship in Japan has tested positive. All were being held under quarantine at the Sheba Hospital outside Tel Aviv.

Another four Israelis in Japan were hospitalized after testing positive for the coronavirus.

Israel has suspended all flights to and from China, and now requires Israelis returning from China, Hong Kong, Macau, Singapore or Thailand to be quarantined for two weeks.

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