

Outbreak: Turkey and Pakistan close borders with Iran over coronavirus deaths

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Ankara also suspends incoming flights as Iranian authorities try to contain outbreak in country.

Turkey and Pakistan have both closed their borders with Iran, with Turkey also halting incoming flights, in an effort to stop the potential spread of coronavirus after Iran reported 43 cases of the disease.

All highways and railways were closed at the border between Turkey and Iran as of 5pm local time and flights from Iran had been suspended, the Turkish health minister, Fahrettin Koca, said on Sunday. Flights from Turkey to Iran were still being allowed.

A provincial official in Pakistan and the country's Frontier Corps also confirmed that it had sealed its land border with Iran.

Parts of Iran face lockdown as part of Iranian attempts to control the spread of Covid-19, which has killed eight people in Iran. "If the situation gets any worse city staff will be expected to convert to teleworkers," said the mayor of Tehran, Pirouz Hanachi.

The Iranian authorities have also been fighting an information war amid widespread distrust on social media about whether the public is being told the truth about the scale of the outbreak.

Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, claimed Tehran's enemies were spreading mistrust and blamed western scare stories for the low turnout in parliamentary elections on Friday.

The first confirmed death from the virus in the Middle East was reported last Wednesday in the city of Qom, about an hour's drive from Tehran. The number of people on the streets of the capital has been noticeably lower than usual, with many shops shut and face masks in short supply and increasingly expensive.

The authorities have introduced increasingly drastic measures in Tehran and 13 provinces, including the closure of schools, universities, cinemas and theatres. Public buses in Tehran have been disinfected, and posters put up urging people to clean their hands and not shake those of others.

The city's school system has been shut for a minimum of two days to allow for disinfection spraying. There was also widespread advice to stay home and avoid places where people congregate. Some football matches were cancelled. Metro stations were not shut, but water fountains and shops were all being closed. The council said it was also taking new steps to dispose of waste.

At the airport, roughly a third of passengers were wearing masks, but there were no special controls on people leaving the country. Turkey, Iraq and Pakistan have either closed borders or are imposing

extra health checks.

Despite the precautions the vast majority were carrying on with their daily lives as normal.

Some of the families of those that have died in Qom claim to know of no contact with anyone in China, prompting claims that this may be an indigenous disease. The health minister, Saeed Namaki, denied this, saying one victim traded in China and had travelled there indirectly. The strain discovered in Iran matched that in China, he said.

He has recommended no travel to or from Qom, as well as promising to distribute free coronavirus packages to residents in the area, including masks and educational brochures.

Patrick Wintour in Tehran

P.S.

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