

COVID-19 FEAR IN IRAN'S PRISONS

—
Iran Must Do More to Protect Prisoners



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SUMMARY:

In late March, as the deadly COVID-19 raged in Iran, prisons across the country witnessed protests, escape attempts, and other forms of unrest. Incidents that prison officials downplayed as minor resulted in clashes with security forces and the reported death and injury of dozens of inmates. These events and Abdorrahman Boroumand Center for Human Rights in Iran (ABC) research and interviews with inmates and other knowledgeable sources shed light on justified fear and anxiety of prisoners faced with an unprecedented health crisis. In rising up, they have spoken in one of the few voices left to them of a reality that demands the world's attention: an ongoing crisis of Iran's neglect of the human rights of persons deprived of liberty, which far precedes the COVID-19 emergency.

In late February, judiciary officials announced protocols meant to head off the spread of the novel coronavirus to be implemented country-wide, including daily rounds of disinfection, awareness trainings, distribution of hygienic supplies, and the formation of full-time task forces to monitor prisoners "day and night" and identify those at risk. Reports collected by ABC indicate that these measures have been implemented partially and inconsistently.

Releases of certain classes of inmates (100,000 according to Iran), a welcome step toward prison decrowding, have been inadequate in scope. Many inmates, including those convicted of offenses not recognized in international law who should not have been jailed in the first place and those who cannot afford bail, remain behind bars while the judiciary continues to prosecute and jail for political and non-violent alleged offenses, such as drug use. The inadequacy of steps taken to prevent the spread of the deadly virus have failed to allay the concerns of many inmates, who continue to languish in fear in substandard conditions.

In several prisons overcrowding makes social distancing a serious challenge. At Karaj Central Prison, halls with 300 beds are made to accommodate twice as many inmates, while in some wards of Vakilabad Prison (Mashhad), inmates sleep on floors and in entryways. Sanitary facilities are too few for the number of inmates in most prisons and hot water is available one or two hours per day. At Parsilon (Khorramabad,) six toilets have been placed in a space built for three, forcing inmates to touch dirty walls while squeezing into stalls.

In facilities investigated in this report, hand sanitizers are not available for prisoners and the already-inadequate distribution of hygienic supplies like soap and detergent available free of charge has not been increased adequately or at all, forcing some inmates to rinse their hands with water only (llam). Cleanings are conducted every four or five days at Ahvaz Central Prison,

and inmates have taken to using a bleach-water mixture bought at the prison store to conduct cleanings themselves. Prisoners at Ahvaz Central and Langarud prisons report the use of weak-smelling chemicals in cleanings by officials, regarding whose efficacy they have doubts.

The dire state of Iran's prisons is a policy choice, the responsibility for which rests with parliamentarians and governments who have, for four decades, failed to prioritize the country's penal system in resource allocation or, as recommended by experts and prison officials, take meaningful action toward reforming a draconian criminal code toward decriminalization. In normal times, prisoners are more vulnerable to diseases than the general population. In a time of pandemic, when COVID-19 infections and deaths have been reported from several prisons, the choice of not prioritizing prisoners' right to health in accordance with detailed international guidelines can have devastating consequences inside and outside prisons.

The international community must press Iran for compliance with its human rights obligations to protect prisoners' right to health and their lives. It is imperative not to view the systemic shortcomings in ensuring minimum standards in the treatment of prisoners and lack of resources - regarding which some Iranian officials have been vocal and critical for years - as a consequence of the current economic sanctions and resulting hardship. Marshalling the political will required to urgently remedy the failures detailed in this report demands that Iran be held accountable for not prioritizing prisoners' human rights, denying access to independent monitors, and for its lack of transparency.

ABC calls on Iran to release prisoners whose convictions are politically motivated, those who cannot afford bail, and those held for minor crimes, and to heed the advice and detailed recommendations of international organizations like the World Health Organization and take practical, concrete steps toward safeguarding the health and rights of persons deprived of liberty. Only such measures, coupled with transparency, proper monitoring, and accountability, can prevent an unprecedented catastrophe of mass infections and unrest.

METHODOLOGY:

Research into human rights conditions in Iran faces severe limitations. The Iranian authorities do not permit access to prisons and to the country to independent human rights monitors, and Iranians who report on human rights abuses face arrest and prosecution. Many Iranians, including human rights activists and lawyers, have been imprisoned or are currently serving prison terms for reporting on human rights violations by various government bodies and the judiciary. Others have been forced into exile.

This report relies on official statements published in online news channels and judiciary websites as well as information reported by former prisoners and lawyers on social media and in reports published by various human rights organizations in Persian and English.

Abdorrahman Boroumand Center for Human Rights in Iran has also carried out interviews, granted on condition of anonymity, in March and April 2020, with eight former or recently released prisoners as well as other knowledgeable sources in Iran. The information they provided on various prisons are for the most part included in this report, but names and dates have been withheld in order to not compromise interviewees' identity and safety.

COVID-19 FEAR in IRAN'S PRISONS

IRAN MUST DO MORE TO PROTECT PRISONERS

The spread of COVID-19 in the Islamic Republic of Iran has recently led to fear and unrest in prisons across the country and claimed the lives of several prisoners.¹ The pandemic has made all the more urgent concerns that have been repeatedly raised by human rights organizations,² including Abdorrahman Boroumand Center for Human Rights in Iran (ABC),³ over overcrowding, poor hygiene and nutrition, and the prevalence of disease in the country's prisons. Enclosed living spaces, along with prisoners' weakened immune systems, facilitate the spread of the deadly virus. The World Health Organization (WHO) and other experts⁴ have stressed the importance of preventive measures and provided guidelines to limit the spread, both within prisons and from prisons to the community at large.⁵ Iran's judiciary has taken some welcome steps to curb the proliferation of the virus in prisons, including the temporary release of thousands of prisoners.⁶ However, ABC research into several prisons reveals that preventive measures have been inadequate and inconsistently implemented. The scope of coronavirus transmission within the prison system is unknown and Iranian officials refuse to provide the public with data. Improving prison conditions requires significant structural reform and time. In the short term, serious political will and



Ahwaz Central Prison
Telegram Channel @SepehrAzadi, April 1, 2020

¹ Amnesty International has reported that some 36 prisoners are feared dead in clashes with state agents inside prisons. April 9, 2020 (<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/04/iran-prisoners-killed-by-security-forces-during-covid19-pandemic-protests/>)

² See e.g. January 2020 Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran (<https://www.iranrights.org/library/document/3708>)

³ See "Iran Should do More, Act Transparently to Protect Prisoners from COVID-19," March 6, 2020 (<https://www.iranrights.org/newsletter/issue/106>)

⁴ Penal Reform International, "Coronavirus: Healthcare and human rights of people in prison," March 16, 2020 (<https://www.penalreform.org/resource/coronavirus-healthcare-and-human-rights-of-people-in/>)

⁵ "Preparedness, Prevention and Control of COVID-19 in Prisons and Other Places of Detention," World Health Organization, March 15, 2020 (<https://www.iranrights.org/library/document/3718>)

⁶ Mizan Online, March 28, 2020 (<https://www.mizanonline.com/fa/news/608692/>)

transparency are the country's only arms against the pandemic. Iran can and must do more to ensure the health of prison inmates and staff.



Hamedan Prison officials, March 18
Official Website of Hamedan Prisons

In some measure, Iran's judiciary has moved to address the pandemic. On February 24, 2020 the judiciary announced its intent to obtain additional funding for prisons (which, one month later, had yet to be allocated⁷) and reduce the prison population via exceptional releases, furloughs, and the reduction, to the extent possible, of incoming prisoners.⁸ On February 26 and 29, Iran's Chief Justice issued two circulars authorizing leave through April 3, 2020 for prisoners incarcerated for failure to pay blood money or other financial penalties. Those sentenced to 5 years of

imprisonment or less were also listed among the categories of prisoners eligible for leave. Listed as ineligible were those sentenced to death, convicted of armed robbery, multiple counts of robbery, espionage, or sentenced to more than five years on national security charges. Judiciary officials were also instructed to hold off on detention orders and extend all releases on bail for prisoners whose sentences have been finalized, except for "essential" cases, through April 19. The term "essential" was not defined in the circular.⁹

Also on February 29, Prisons Organization head, Asghar Jahangir, acknowledged that prisoners' rights include the right to health. He instructed provincial prison authorities via video conference to take the necessary measures to prevent and combat the spread of coronavirus, including daily rounds of disinfection, hygiene training for inmates and prison staff, distribution of hygienic supplies, and the formation of full-time task forces to monitor prisoners "day and night" and identify those at risk so that necessary measures can be taken to immediately isolate and treat them.¹⁰ Jahangir reiterated these recommendations in another video conference with prison authorities on March 30, stating:

"Measures to prevent the entry of the novel coronavirus into prisons, and exceptional hygiene measures — including daily, ongoing disinfections of facilities and equipment, making hygienic equipment available to prisoners, providing necessary self-protection training for prisoners and guards, forming health committees within prisons to control and

⁷ Mizan Online, March 28, 2020 (<https://www.mizanonline.com/fa/news/608692/>)

⁸ Tasnim News, February 24, 2020 (<https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1398/12/05/2210188/>).

⁹ Other prisoners not eligible include those convicted of kidnapping, where the victim has not pardoned them; those convicted of acid attacks; those convicted of smuggling, buying, or selling more than two firearms; those convicted of hodud crimes, and those convicted of defrauding a large number of people. Eligible prisoners except for those convicted of financial crimes may be granted leave even where they are unable to post bail, provided that there is "certainty" they will return ([https://www.iranrights.org/library/document/3712](https://www.iranrights.org/library/document/3712;); <https://www.iranrights.org/library/document/3713>)

¹⁰ "Kerman Prisons Organization, February 29, 2020 (<https://bit.ly/2Kd1G71>)

protect prisoners' health full-time by identifying those in danger, in a way that [incorporates] the prison doctor's preliminary identifications and diagnoses regarding segregation and other hygienic and treatment measures — should be taken without delay.”¹¹

Historically, however, rhetoric on improving prison conditions has not been met by resource allocation, serious monitoring of implementation, or accountability. Mass incarceration — a product of decades of highly punitive laws and sentencing practices¹² — has combined with corruption, incompetence, and lack of resources to create a hazardous environment for inmates.



Teleconference of Prison Officials, March 30, 2020
Official Website of Kerman Prisons

Unchecked in its zealous application of draconian laws, Iran's judiciary and security apparatus continues to arrest hundreds of thousands each year and send them into prisons, detention centers, and camps that it neglects to maintain. The judiciary is also in charge of administering the prisons where prisoners it convicts or detains are held. In the absence of independent monitoring, prisoners whose rights are violated by the judiciary must address their complaints to the judiciary: the perpetrator itself. Prisoners' complaints are most often simply ignored. Experts and prison officials stress the need for legal reform to reduce the number of crimes carrying prison as key to the reduction of the prison population.¹³ But draft decriminalization laws are not prioritized in the parliament.



Prisons Organization Head
Asghar Jahangir
Mizan News

Iranian prison officials and parliamentarians have also repeatedly warned that the limited funds allocated to the Prisons Organization leave it unable to ensure prisoners' nutrition and health. In August 2016, Prisons Organization head Asghar Jahangir said that the organization had been “wronged” and was struggling with shortages stemming from a one trillion toman (c. 323,000 in the official government-subsidized exchange rate of the time) funding deficit.¹⁴

¹¹ Kerman Prisons Organization, March 30, 2020 (<https://bit.ly/3ah9ZJv>)

¹² Iranian law criminalizes more than 1,800 acts, which according to Iranian experts leads to mass incarceration (ISNA, January 3, 2017, <https://www.isna.ir/news/95101408774/>). Based on ABC's research, close to 200 acts carry the death penalty (<https://www.iranrights.org/library/document/3591>). Ongoing harsh criminalization of non-violent drug offenses in particular, including inmates with former death sentences now serving long jail terms per a 2017 drug law reform, is one driver of prison overcrowding (<https://www.iranrights.org/library/document/3567>).

¹³ See head of Prison Organization's statement, Tasnim News, May 13, 2019 (<https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1398/02/23/2010338/>)

¹⁴ c. 284,000 USD in the unofficial exchange rate of the time. Here and throughout, official subsidized exchange rates taken here and Iran Central Bank (https://www.cbi.ir/exrates/rates_fa.aspx) and unofficial rates taken from TGJU (https://www.tgju.org/chart/price_dollar_rl/2)

Despite a steady increase in the prison population, the budget for the Prisons Organization was cut from 944 billion tomans (c. 291,000 in the official government-subsidized exchange rate, at the beginning of the Iranian year 1396)¹⁵ in the 2017/2018 year to 800 billion tomans (c. 244,000 USD in the official government-subsidized exchange rate, at the beginning of the Iranian year 1397)¹⁶ in 2018/2019. At the time this budget was proposed in December of 2017, the Prisons Organization was 80 billion tomans (c. 22,500 USD in the official government-subsidized exchange rate of the time)¹⁷ behind on water, gas, and electricity expenses, and already facing a shortfall of 1.5 trillion tomans (c. 422,000 in the official government-subsidized exchange rate of the time).¹⁸ The allocated budget threatened the prison system's ability to provide three daily meals to inmates, according to Jahangir.¹⁹ Jahangir also stated that at that time 10 to 15 percent of inmates had to sleep on floors; that the average age of prison facilities - 20 to 25 years - had exceeded their usual span of usefulness of 15 years; and that renovation efforts were consistently stymied by budget denials and requirements that prisons be located outside of cities.²⁰



Chief Justice Visiting Karaj Central Prison
January 2, 2020
IRIB News



COVID-19 awareness raising
at Ilam Prison
Official Website of Ilam Prisons

The continued lack of attention to prison conditions endangers the lives of inmates as COVID-19 runs rampant across the country. No significant resources seem to have been dedicated to protecting prisoners during the pandemic. Though some measures have been taken in several prisons,²¹ six weeks after the official acknowledgement of the COVID-19 crisis, the judiciary's directives have been ignored and/or inconsistently and arbitrarily implemented in many prisons.

To date, according to official statements, close to 100,000 prisoners have been released per exceptional directives prompted by COVID-19.²² Officials have not provided numbers on coronavirus-related releases on a prison-by-prison basis.

However, many prisoners who pose no threat to society remain behind bars: they include religious and ethnic minorities, human rights lawyers, anti-mandatory veil activists, labor and student activists, environmentalists, peaceful protesters, those detained or convicted of ordinary crimes,

¹⁵ c. 252,000 USD at the unofficial exchange rate

¹⁶ c. 164,000 USD in the unofficial exchange rate

¹⁷ c. 18,900 USD in the unofficial exchange rate of the time

¹⁸ c. 356,000 USD in the unofficial exchange rate of the time

¹⁹ Asr-e Eghtesad, December 13, 2017, (<https://www.asre-eghtesad.com/havades/cat-2/25435>). Radio Farda,

December 30, 2017, (<https://www.radiofarda.com/a/iran-prison-budget-problem/28947378.html>)

²⁰ Shargh Press, December 30, 2017 (<http://www.sharghpress.com/ایا-کاهش-بودجه-سازمان-بزدان-ها-نیاز-های/>)

²¹ The general director for Hamedan province prisons announced steps including hygiene education, distribution of masks and gloves to visitors, and the setting up of segregated wards for suspected COVID-19 patients had commenced even before the corona crisis was officially declared. Mojnews, February 27, 2020 (<https://www.mojnews.com/fa/tiny/news-320325>).

²² Mizan Online, March 28, 2020 (<https://www.mizanonline.com/fa/news/608692/>)

including on nonviolent drug charges. The United Nations' Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights has urged all governments to "release every person detained without sufficient legal basis, including political prisoners, and those detained for critical, dissenting views."²³

Despite exceptional releases over the past few weeks, prisons remain overcrowded. The decision, announced in a statement by the judiciary's Human Rights Council,²⁴ not to send convicts to prison until April 20, is not fully implemented either. State agents continue to send people to prisons and detention centers for addiction, minor offenses, or ostensibly political crimes such as reporting about the spread of the virus and its victims. On March 3, an individual who had recorded video of dozens of bodies inside a morgue in Qom was taken into custody after the video was widely distributed on social media.²⁵ On March 14, Tehran's Police Chief announced the arrest of 27 people for "spreading rumors" about the coronavirus.²⁶ On April 2, the Iranian Cyber Police arrested civil society activist Amir Chamani in Tabriz after summoning him on unknown charges.²⁷ In the first week of March 2020, authorities announced the arrest of hundreds of drug users, 407 in Hormozgan Province.²⁸ On April 3, the police chief in eastern Tehran Province said 111 people had been arrested in a raid of a "norm-breaking" mixed-sex private party in Sharyar.²⁹



Footage of Qom morgue widely circulated on social media. The individual who recorded this footage, shedding light on the scope of the crisis at its epicenter, was later arrested.

Prosecutions for protest activity and expressions of dissent have also continued: on April 14, Branch 1167 of the Criminal Court of Tehran Province held a trial for Fatemeh Mary Mohammadi, charged with "disturbing public peace and order by means of participating in an illegal gathering" after she participated in a protest against the Revolutionary Guard's shooting down of a passenger airline in January 2020. The judge reportedly questioned Mohammadi, a Christian convert who had previously been charged for Christian activism and membership in an evangelical group, about her religious opinions.³⁰ In an order issued April 12, Naser Ashjari, who is over 65 years of age and diabetic, was summoned to Branch 26 of the Revolutionary Court in Tehran on May 5 for charges

²³ Remarks of the spokesperson of the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, April 3, 2020 (<https://www.iranrights.org/library/document/3717>)

²⁴ In an April 5 statement, the judiciary's Human Rights Headquarters declared it had taken several steps toward "defending human dignity" since the outset of the outbreak, including regular, 24-hour cleaning of areas and facilities used by inmates, increasing availability of hygiene products to prisoners, control of food products into prisons, cessation of transfers of new inmates into prisons through April 19, and the setting up of night shifts for staff engaged in processing bail and leave requests and the segregation of ill prisoners. IRNA, April 5, 2020 (<https://www.irna.ir/news/83739585/>)

²⁵ IRNA, March 3, 2020, (<https://www.irna.ir/news/83700652/>)

²⁶ Bultan News, March 14, 2020 (<https://www.bultannews.com/fa/news/658619>)

²⁷ HRANA, April 2, 2020 (<https://www.hra-news.org/2020/hranews/a-24298/>)

²⁸ Mehr News, March 7, 2020 (<https://www.mehrnews.com/news/4872302/>)

²⁹ Tasnim, April 3, 2020 (<https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1399/01/15/2235579/111>)

³⁰ HRANA, April 14, 2020 (<https://www.hra-news.org/2020/hranews/a-24406/>)

of “insulting the Prophet” and “propaganda against the regime” brought against him in 2017.³¹ On April 15, Cyber Police announced the arrest of an Instagram account admin based in Zahedan, Sistan and Baluchistan province, on charges of “insulting sanctities”.³² The Fars Province Judiciary Chief announced on April 19 that three individuals had been arrested for unsuccessfully attempting to smuggle smartphones into Adelabad Prison during unrest which occurred there on March 29.³³ The mechanism for renewing even those temporary releases which have been granted is opaque. The lawyer of Isma’il Abdi, a teacher activist imprisoned at Evin, reports that Abdi’s furlough extension was denied on April 20 and he was returned to prison to resume his sentence.³⁴

In many prisons, overcrowding makes social distancing physically impossible. Measures to raise awareness among prisoners have been insufficient and inconsistent, and prisoners’ hygiene is gravely inadequate to protect prisoners from a pandemic. Eyewitness reports collected by ABC and reports from other sources indicate substandard conditions exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis, as well as mounting anxiety and fear among prisoners.



Prisoners hiding from the sun, Hormozgan Prison
Dolphine News, June 30, 2019

In Parsilon Prison (Khorramabad, Lorestan Province), the infrastructure is outdated, and the sanitary facilities are so dirty that sources said they were reluctant to even set foot in the toilet area. Bathroom facilities there were renovated with prison labor using a patchwork of broken and uneven tile that collect dirt and debris; an area which once accommodated three toilets has been refashioned to fit six, in such a way that inmates must slide sideways into the cramped stalls, unavoidably coming into contact with dirty walls.³⁵ During a surprise visit to Parsilon to follow up on COVID-19-related unrest there, Lorestan Judiciary Head Mohammad Raz acknowledged the prison's urgent need to update its infrastructure.³⁶ There are fewer newcomers to Parsilon, and all fresh arrivals are quarantined, yet there is only one sanitary facility for all of those quarantined and none are given clean clothes. Every month, Parsilon prisoners are given a limited amount of soap, shampoo, and washing powder, but the quantities of these products have not changed in response to the COVID-19 crisis. While visitations have totally stopped, prison staff circulate imprudently from room to room, sometimes without masks. The product that is sprayed inside prison every other day has no scent, raising prisoners’ concerns of its efficacy as a cleaning agent. Prison authorities’ empty promises of release have exacerbated stress and tension among prisoners, according to an ABC source, in particular when news broke that only a small percentage of Parsilon’s estimated 2,000 prisoners were eligible for early release (about 50) or furlough (about 100). High bail amounts have prevented the release of many of those eligible.³⁷ Following the escape on March 20, 2020

³¹ Interview of Naser Ashjari with Iran International, April 11, 2020 (<https://t.me/IranintlTV/51627>); Summons order of April 12, 2002 (<https://www.instagram.com/p/B--e5zaJnli/?igshid=gtxnixa49y6w>)

³² HRANA, April 15, 2020 (https://www.hra-news.org/2020/hranews/a-24424/?tg_rhash=22a41dd9689763)

³³ Qalamna, April 19, 2020 (<https://qalamna.ir/fa/news/110888>)

³⁴ On April 19 the judiciary announced that all furloughs would be extended through April 29. (Twitter account of Hossein Taj, April 20, 2019 https://twitter.com/hosein_taj/status/1252189947651653632)

³⁵ Interview with source with knowledge of Parsilon Prison, April 2 and 15, 2020

³⁶ Iran Student News Agency, April 6, 2020 (<https://www.isna.ir/news/99011809361>)

³⁷ Interview with source with knowledge of Parsilon Prison, April 2 and 15, 2020

of 23 prisoners from a “training and work therapy camp” in Parsilon, the Lorestan Prison Organization acknowledged that none of the 200 inmates working in the camp are dangerous, and that all are being held for minor crimes with one-year convictions.³⁸ It is unclear why these prisoners had not been released pursuant to the judiciary’s February circular.

In the Greater Tehran Penitentiary, where many cases of infectious diseases such as tuberculosis, meningitis, and hepatitis have been reported, the official approach seems to be more security- than health-oriented, and little information has been provided to prisoners about the disease. The prison remains too crowded to allow for proper social distancing: in late 2019 in Building 4, Ward 2, approximately 1,500 prisoners were divided in three rooms. Each room was equipped with only 14 toilets and showers to accommodate the 400 to 500 people it hosted. Hot water was made available one hour per day, sometime between 4 and 6 a.m. There is no self-serve source of drinking water. Personal cleaning products (soap, shampoo, washing powder) are distributed every few months, and in such small quantities that prisoners with more financial means buy their own supplies and donate their rations to cellmates in need.



Greater Tehran Prison
Mashregh News

Tuberculosis and meningitis are common in Greater Tehran, increasing inmates’ vulnerability to other infectious diseases. In late January/early February, a room in Ward 4 was quarantined for about 350 inmates with tuberculosis. Vaccines have also been distributed for meningitis, but in too limited quantities, according to ABC’s source, to protect all prisoners. After the pandemic was announced in late February, medical staff in at least one building were provided with protective clothing, which was removed only a few hours later on orders from prison security officials who said the gear would provoke fear among inmates. Consequently, clinic staff working there make do with only masks and gloves. In Building 1, a room has been quarantined for prisoners believed to be infected with coronavirus. Yet, on April 4, five prisoners suspected of being infected were found in Room 5, Building 2 of the same prison. The room in question, which was holding 200 prisoners, was immediately quarantined.³⁹ ABC does not have information about the fate of those in quarantine.



Iftar at Karaj Central Prison
Iran Prisons Organization

In Karaj Central Prison (Karaj, Alborz Province), new arrivals must pass through two quarantines, the second

³⁸ Tabnak News, March 21, 2020 (<http://tabnakbato.ir/fa/news/174400/>)

³⁹ Interview with source with knowledge of Greater Tehran Penitentiary, April 4, 2020

of which lasts 15 days, before being transferred into the general population. Though many prisoners have benefited from prevention measures granting their early release, many wards are reportedly filled to at least two times their capacity. In normal times, some wards with less than 300 beds, 15 toilets, and six showers lodge 500 to 600 people and, at times, up to 900 inmates. It sometimes takes up to two years for newcomers to have a bed; they sleep on the floor in close quarters in the meantime. Limited early releases and furloughs, possible for about 70 of the 600 inmates in Ward 6 for example, have not resolved rampant overcrowding, and social distancing there is inconceivable.⁴⁰ The mother of a prisoner serving time for an alleged drug offense told ABC in early March that her son is eligible for furlough, but that she cannot afford the high bail amount. Worried about the lack of food, poor hygiene, and rumors about two inmates dying from coronavirus, she said: “we are sitting here at home waiting to see when our child will die.”⁴¹

Hot water access is limited to one hour in some wards, while other wards get two hours. A small, low-quality piece of soap, a small shampoo, and two cups of washing powder — enough to last about two weeks — are distributed to inmates once every two to three months. According to one source, there are three doctors in the prison clinic taking turns working 24-hour shifts. Information about disease prevention and management consists of posters with instructions on handwashing on the wall behind the guards’ desk at the entrance of the ward. Prisoners can comply by washing their hands with dishwashing liquid available in the bathrooms. A source with knowledge of another ward reports that there is not enough soap for regular handwashing and that additional cleaning products have not been distributed, commenting, “they tell us to wash our hands regularly, but with what?”⁴²



Visit of Minister of Health to Karaj Central Prison, 2015

ISNA

At Karaj Central, disinfectants are provided to prison staff only. About twice a week, wards, phones, and surfaces are sprayed with what is believed to be a mixture of water and alcohol. An ABC source reports that the guards have been altogether avoiding another ward which was disinfected only once in March. Prisoners who have circulated inside the prison, e.g. between wards and the clinic, as well as prisoners tasked with cleaning wards, administrative offices, and the overflowing sewer in the courtyard, are given masks and gloves when leaving their own ward. They then return to their

⁴⁰ Interview with source with knowledge of Karaj Central Prison, April 8, 2020

⁴¹ Interview with mother of Karaj Central inmate, March 3 and 23, 2020

(https://twitter.com/IranRights_org/status/1235236363131408384)

⁴² Interview with source with knowledge of Karaj Central Prison, April 8, 2020

ward with filthy clothes and, due to the limited number of showers, wait sometimes up to two hours before being able to shower and change.⁴³

A suite of Room 15 in Building 1 has been sectioned off for prisoners believed to be infected with coronavirus. In Ward 6, the first inmate exhibiting a high fever and a cough — a man in his late 50s — was taken into the quarantine suite in late February. According to ABC's source, the number of quarantined patients had risen to at least 35 by late March. Two of those taken to quarantine reportedly worked in the prison's kitchen. According to ABC's source, fear was apparent even among prison guards, several of whom asked for unpaid leave.⁴⁴

Langarud Prison in the city of Qom, the epicenter of COVID-19, is notorious for its lack of hygiene. "Food and cleanliness are below zero," explained a former inmate. Lice infections are routine, and many inmates opt to sleep on the floor to distance themselves from bed bugs. Wards 1 and 5, with 500 prisoners each, are so crowded that people had to sleep in the courtyard through the fall. In one instance, prisoners had to go on strike and stop eating to convince officials to provide a couple of canisters of bug spray for their rooms. The only relatively clean ward is the Quran Ward, where most beds are deemed fit to be slept on. To get access to the Ward, however, prisoners have to commit to memorizing passages from the Quran. Prison authorities grant credits for participating in mass prayers that can be exchanged for advantages like in-person visitations. Prisoners who do not participate in prayers may see their phone or water privileges cut off as punishment.⁴⁵

Following the public announcement of the COVID-19 emergency, the aforementioned posters indicated to Langarud prisoners how to wash their hands. At that time there was enough soap for handwashing, and guards were given masks and gloves. Several guards who circulated among prisoners were reportedly infected and disappeared from the prison without further explanation. In one ward, door handles and windows were disinfected with a liquid that smelled like dishwashing soap just once every three days.⁴⁶ An official with the Qom Province Relief Committee declared on March 30 that 3,000 care packages containing masks, hand sanitizer, and a cleaning agent were to be distributed to prisoners.⁴⁷

Ahvaz Central Prison (Sheiban, Khuzestan), formerly a detoxification center for drug users, is also overcrowded. Informed sources had reported in February 2019 that each room held up to 30 prisoners and inmates slept on the floor and had to wait in line for hours to use the restrooms. The lack of nutritious food and medical care in the prison had created a fertile ground for diseases.⁴⁸

In light of the COVID-19 crisis, the quarantine duration for newcomers was increased from one to two weeks. Prisoners are given a shirt and pants when they arrive, but there are very few cleaning products, forcing some prisoners to wash up with water only. Prisoners have been told to keep a

⁴³ Interview with source with knowledge of Karaj Central Prison, April 2, 2020

⁴⁴ ABC interviews with sources with knowledge of Karaj Penitentiary, April 2 and 8, 2020.

⁴⁵ Interview with source with knowledge of Langarud Prison, April 4, 2020.

⁴⁶ Ibid. Local news reported that 8 Langarud residents suspected of being infected with COVID-19 had died, 64 were being treated in the hospital by March 3. Bultan News (<https://www.bultannews.com/fa/news/656597/>)

⁴⁷ Hawza News, March 30, 2020 (<https://www.hawzahnews.com/news/893441/>).

⁴⁸ Human Rights Activists News, February 11, 2019 (<https://www.hra-news.org/2019/hranews/a-19152/>)

one-meter distance from others and to disinfect their hands, but in practice this is not always possible. Quarantined prisoners crowd around five or six faucets for both dishwashing and personal hygiene. A number of masks were distributed on one occasion, but there are no gloves or any disinfecting products. Prisoners attempt to manage on their own with a mixture of water and bleach that they buy from the prison store. Prison authorities also pass through the prison every four or five days to spray disinfectant, but their cleanings are sporadic, and they use a product that lacks the alcohol smell of the product applied to the guards' quarters. The guards wear masks and gloves and do not enter the prisoners' wards. Like those housed in other prisons, inmates at Ahvaz Central are tense and restless. In March, the review of furlough applicants was lagging due to the absence or limited work hours of relevant officials. Most prisoners were not eligible for temporary release.⁴⁹

In Ilam Prison (Ilam Province), social distancing is not an option. The Salamat ward (Ward 1) holds about 40 people, with one shower and two toilets to be shared by them all. Ward 2 has about 40 beds to sleep 130 inmates who double up on single mattresses or sleep on the floor. Prison authorities did not appear to take the pandemic's hazards seriously. The process of releasing prisoners has been extremely slow. Though some prisoners with lighter sentences have been released, many of those prisoners eligible for leave are still in prison due in part to the absence of relevant officials. No effort has been made to raise awareness among prisoners about the coronavirus, and as of mid-March, guards were not wearing masks or gloves when circulating among the wards.⁵⁰



Disinfection measures at Ilam Prison
Official Website of Ilam Prisons



Ilam Prison
Peyk-e Iran

Hygiene at Ilam Prison is substandard. Though prisoners have access to hot water, limited quantities of soap are provided for handwashing and general cleaning needs. Inmates who cannot afford their own soap sometimes have no choice but to rinse their hands with water only. Prison authorities have not provided additional soap or disinfecting products to help protect inmates against the new viral threat. In the past several weeks, ABC's source has seen only one instance of a chlorine-smelling disinfectant mixture being sprayed in the wards and between beds. There is no visible monitoring of prisoner health from prison guards or medical staff, and many

⁴⁹ Interview with source with knowledge of Ahvaz Central Prison, April 2, 2020.

⁵⁰ Interview with source with knowledge of Ilam Prison, April 2020

prisoners eligible for furlough are still in prison reportedly due to the absence of relevant personnel to process their releases.⁵¹

Prisoners in Vakilabad Prison (Mashhad, Khorasan Razavi) are also at risk. Overcrowding persists, like in Room 2 of Wards 6/1, where drug users are held, and in Room 4 where inmates sleep even in the entryway owing to lack of space.⁵² In Ward Five, up to 800 prisoners may be held in one room and prisoners have to sleep on the floor in the hallway and even on cardboard put over the toilets. Prisoner education about the coronavirus is limited to posters and leaflets telling them how to wash their hands properly. Even health personnel are not provided with enough masks or gloves. In Ward 6/1, an unidentified cleaning agent is sprayed twice a day.⁵³

According to Mohammad Nourizad, imprisoned at Vakilabad after signing an open letter demanding the Supreme Leader's resignation, a viral outbreak has occurred in the women's ward, prompting the sectioning off of a room for suspected coronavirus patients. Hengameh Vahedian, imprisoned for signing the same letter, said that 30 suspected COVID-19 patients are being kept in close quarters there without any testing. Prison officials reportedly conduct disinfections with concentrated bleach. In the prison clinic, those presenting with fevers have reportedly been handed suppositories and sent away without further explanation or treatment.⁵⁴ The brother of Mohammad Hossein Sepehri, a teacher imprisoned at Vakilabad, says Sepehri began to show symptoms of the coronavirus on March 28 and was transferred on April 2 along with other political prisoners to a Ministry of Intelligence facility. Sepehri is presently being held in solitary confinement, while his brother insists that his condition warrants an urgent transfer to the hospital.⁵⁵

The family member of an inmate at Amirabad Prison (Gorgan County, Golestan Province) reports that new prisoners have been introduced into the population amid the pandemic despite a lack of preventative supplies like masks, gloves, and disinfectant at the facility. Two individuals displaying COVID-19 symptoms were released into the prison's prayer room in close proximity to other prisoners, rather than being transferred to hospitals and given appropriate medical care.⁵⁶



Amirabad Prison, Gorgan, July 2014
Shabestan News

Orumieh Prison held 4,000 prisoners in October 2018: four times its capacity according to Mostafa Habibi, the Revolutionary Prosecutor of Orumieh.⁵⁷ Prisoners in several wards have occasionally been denied hot water for a week and up to two months, even during the harsh Orumieh winter.⁵⁸

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² IranWire, April 6, 2020 (<https://en.iranwire.com/fa/features/37605>)

⁵³ Report collected by ABC from source with knowledge of Vakilabad Prison, April 2, 2020.

⁵⁴ IranWire, April 6, 2020 (<https://en.iranwire.com/fa/features/37605>)

⁵⁵ HRANA, April 6, 2020 (<https://www.hra-news.org/2020/hranews/a-24333/>)

⁵⁶ HRANA, April 6, 2020 (<https://www.hra-news.org/2020/hranews/a-24333/>)

⁵⁷ Tasnim News, October 28, 2018 (<https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1397/08/06/1863587/>)

⁵⁸ Human Rights Activists in Iran, July 2, 2017 (<https://www.hra-news.org/2017/hranews/a-11271/>)

The Orumieh Prison Women's ward is isolated: though there are cameras in all the rooms, the guards' quarters are 10 minutes away, making it difficult to get their attention in an emergency. The Ward holds about 150-160 prisoners divided among four rooms, where about 40 inmates sleep on three-tiered bunk beds and make do with only two showers and two toilets. One of these rooms, Room 4, hosts prisoners suffering from addiction (the majority of women held in Orumieh, according to ABC's source, are imprisoned for addiction or other drug-related charges). Food provided by the prisons is of particularly poor quality. The ward gets a doctor's visit once a day between 11 a.m. and noon; a nurse and midwife are present in the examination room an hour before. The medical team is poorly equipped, and inmates rarely get a proper examination.



**A Parliamentarian Visits Orumieh Central Prison
September 4, 2018**
Official Website of West Azerbaijan Prisons

The women's ward is also infested with fleas. Prison authorities do not provide soap and shampoo to prisoners. Those who cannot afford to pay for these products rely on the generosity of others or work for other inmates to afford to buy them. Prior to the COVID-19 spread, the prison did not provide dishwashing liquid to inmates. Following the announcement of the pandemic in February, every room is provided with one liter of dishwashing liquid per month; no additional liquid is provided if the rooms run out. There has

been no change in the medical teams' monitoring or presence in the ward in response to the pandemic, and prison authorities are not providing free soap or shampoo. Once a week, a strong mixture of chlorine and disinfectant is sloshed out of a watering can to clean the sanitary facilities. The judiciary's February directive has not led to a significant number of releases at Orumieh. Prisoners already benefiting from weekend leaves have been asked to remain on leave and some older or sick prisoners are on furlough except those unable to afford their bail.⁵⁹

At Qarchak women's prison (Varamin, Tehran Province), there are 11 wards, two dedicated to drug offenders and two to prisoners convicted of violent crimes. The prison is notorious for its lack of hygiene, nutritious food, and medical care. Each ward, reportedly meant to hold 100, holds almost twice that number. There are 12 restrooms and 10 showers for each ward, several of which are broken or unusable for lack of water. Hot water is available one hour in the morning and one hour in the evening. The prison water is not drinkable, forcing prisoners



Qarchak Women's Prison
IRNA

⁵⁹ ABC interviews with informed source in West Azerbaijan, April 13 and 14, 2020

to buy bottled water at an exorbitant price from the prison store. Prisoners have very limited access to the prison clinic, where equipment and medication are scarce.⁶⁰ Lawyer Omid Moradi, some of whose clients are being held in Qarchak, said in an interview with an Iranian news outlet that cleaning liquid is sold at five times its normal price within the prison.⁶¹ Around 2,000 inmates (1,000 according to a prison official)⁶² are kept in crowded conditions in which some have to sleep on the floor. Long lines form for a shared telephone which is not disinfected, and which inmates themselves are not able to disinfect. Given the prohibition on visitations, some prisoners have no money to purchase necessities, leading to a further decline in hygienic conditions. The small amount of issued soap and washing powder — inadequate for even normal circumstances — has not been increased to account for the COVID-19 crisis. Disinfectants, masks, and gloves are not available to inmates, nor are they used by soldiers and guards. Wards are reportedly disinfected daily and movement between wards has been banned.⁶³

Inmates with COVID-19-like symptoms have been segregated into the facility's gym, which has been repurposed into its own ward. A recently released inmate reported that a prison clinic doctor and nurse have tested positive for COVID-19, as have 20 prisoners from Ward 5 and Ward 6. The latter have been moved to rooms dedicated to conjugal visits and are left without medical attention or equipment such as ventilators. Qarchak Prison does not have the means to stave off fleas: "[So] what do you think they can do to fight coronavirus?" the source said.⁶⁴ A prison doctor interviewed in an Iranian media news report acknowledged having seen two COVID-19 infection cases in Qarchak.⁶⁵

An ABC source reports that scant access to sanitation equipment in Tehran's Evin Prison has led staff to clean quarters with torches and topical antiseptic. Fevers and colds were common among inmates even before the coronavirus crisis. In one recent instance, guards wanted to introduce new prisoners directly into a ward, and only placed the newcomers in quarantine when the inmates protested.⁶⁶ Sepideh Farhan, released temporarily from Evin on April 6, reported on Instagram that 19 women continue to be denied temporary leave there, including two who meet the judiciary's guidelines for temporary release. There has been no increase in the 10-minute phone time prisoners have 3 times a week. Farhan expressed concerns about the delay in the provision of disinfectants and the fact that physicians are not permitted to enter the ward. Prisoners in need of medical attention have no choice but to go to the prison clinic, which they fear increases exposure to the virus. Quarantined inmates who cannot afford dishes, boiling water, and phone cards are denied them.⁶⁷ In such circumstances, it is unclear how prisoners' health can be monitored on a daily basis.

⁶⁰ Human Rights Activists in Iran report on Qarchak, May 11, 2019 (<https://www.hra-news.org/2019/hranews/a-20164/>)

⁶¹ Khabar Online, April 16, 2020 (<https://www.khabaronline.ir/news/1377364>)

⁶² Telegram channel of ISNA, April 19, 2020 (<https://t.me/isna94/157501>)

⁶³ Khabar Online, April 16, 2020 (<https://www.khabaronline.ir/news/1377364>)

⁶⁴ BBC Persian 6:00 p.m. News, interview with released prisoners, April 14, 2020.

HRANA, March 26, 2020 (<https://www.hra-news.org/2020/hranews/a-24252/>)

⁶⁵ Telegram channel of ISNA, April 19, 2020 (<https://t.me/isna94/157501>)

⁶⁶ ABC interviews with source close to a security prisoner at Evin, March and April 2020

⁶⁷ Telegram Channel of Bidarzani, April 8, 2020 (<https://t.me/bidarzani/6726>)

ABC is also concerned about the conditions of lesser-known prisons such as the Shahid Lajevardi Prison in Farahabad, Mazandaran Province. Drug offenders, except those sentenced to death or life in prison, are held there. Many are treated with daily doses of methadone; illegal drug use is also common among inmates. The prison tap water is salty and filled with sand, forcing inmates — many of whom have little means — to spend their own money for access to clean water.

Hygiene at Shahid Lajevardi is also dreadful, according to a former inmate and an informed source interviewed by ABC. Inmates take showers twice a week. Three showers with very limited hot water are available per floor, and each floor houses more than 300 prisoners. One hall housing about 400 inmates is equipped with only five toilets and sinks, where inmates must clean both their bodies and the dishes they eat from.⁶⁸ A recently-released inmate reported to ABC's source that, following the judiciary's directive, some prisoners with particularly poor health have been sent on furlough in an attempt to curb the spread of the virus. Prisoners have not been provided cleaning products or disinfectants, however the clinic reportedly disinfects wards for prisoners returning from group prayer at the mosque, where social distancing is not observed.⁶⁹

Meanwhile reports have surfaced of hospitals refusing entry to prisoners because of lack of space, bills left unpaid by the Prisons Organization,⁷⁰ and insurance issues. Ten inmates among the 35 held in the closed-off suite (Room 15) of Karaj Central Prison, whose health had seriously deteriorated, were reportedly taken to Karaj Hospital in early March only to be denied entry and brought back.⁷¹

COVID-19 has already claimed prisoner lives. Fariq Mohammadi, a prisoner suffering from asthma and heart problems, was serving a 25-year sentence on drug charges when serious respiratory problems landed him in the hospital. He died on February 27, 2020.⁷² On March 25, Hassan Javadi, a man with heart disease and a pacemaker serving a 15-year sentence in Orumieh Prison on drug-related charges, died after presenting with COVID-19-like symptoms.⁷³ On March 21, 2020, Fatemeh Alizadeh, 53, arrested three years ago and convicted of transporting drugs, died in Orumieh's Women's Ward. An informed source told ABC that Alizadeh's health took a turn for the worse on Friday March 20: her symptoms included great difficulty breathing, severe diarrhea, and nausea. According to an informed source, guards took Alizadeh away in a blanket, but did not seem to take her symptoms seriously and refused to take her to the clinic. Instead she was placed in an empty room in the juvenile ward where she was found dead at 4:00 a.m. the next day. Prison authorities reportedly attributed her death to high blood pressure.⁷⁴ On March 29, Ahmad Borujeni,

⁶⁸ Abdorrahman Boroumand Center, "A Year Here is Like 10 Somewhere Else: Witness Testimony from Lajevardi Drug Camp." Interview conducted March 18, 2019 (<https://www.iranrights.org/library/document/3569>)

⁶⁹ ABC interview with sources with knowledge of the Shahid Lajevardi Prison Camp, April 4 and 14, 2020

⁷⁰ Such justifications for denials are precedented: in December 2018, imprisoned Gonabadi Darvish Reza Sigarchi was denied admission and a heart stint procedure at Imam Khomeini Hospital in Tehran due to an unpaid debt from the Prisons Organization. Majbuzan-e Nur, December 12, 2018 (<https://www.majzooban.org/fa/index.php/2016-01-06-22-22-54/18331-2018-12-12-09-53-21>)

⁷¹ ABC interview with source with knowledge of Karaj Central, April 2 and 15, 2020

⁷² Kurdistan Human Rights Network, February 28, 2020 (<http://kurdistanhumanrights.net/fa/?p=12039>)

⁷³ HRANA, March 26, 2020 (<https://www.hra-news.org/2020/hranews/a-24252/>)

⁷⁴ Kurdistan Human Rights Network, April 3, 2020 (<http://kurdistanhumanrights.net/fa/?p=12639>); ABC interview with an informed source, April 2020

the Head of Azerbaijan Gharbi Province judiciary, claimed that she had already died the week before in the hospital from heart failure.⁷⁵

Two inmates at Qarchak Prison died of COVID-19 on or around March 26 after being denied admission to a hospital.⁷⁶ ABC's source confirmed that two prisoners aged about 70 and 40 died in Greater Tehran Prison in mid-February, reportedly of coronavirus.⁷⁷ On April 4, Mehdi Rabi'i, a 41-year-old man convicted of a financial offense and serving time in Greater Tehran, died in the hospital. Rabi'i had exhibited COVID-19-like symptoms a week prior, at which time authorities denied him a hospital transfer. As of April 6, at least five other inmates with COVID-19 symptoms were being denied hospital transfers by prison authorities.⁷⁸ In Qom's Langarud Prison, prisoners heard reports that at least three inmates had died as of late March.⁷⁹



Officers of NAJA, the Law Enforcement Force
Official Website of Lorestan Prisons

Recent unrest in at least nine prisons across the country reflects fear and concern on the part of inmates who feel unprotected and vulnerable in the face of the deadly virus. The state response has been heavy-handed and led to scores of deaths and injuries.

On March 19, several inmates reportedly escaped from Parsilon Prison (Khorramabad) amid clashes with prison guards. According to Mahmud Samini, a provincial intelligence official, the clashes resulted in the shooting to death of one person, the injury of another, and the escape of 23 prisoners.⁸⁰ On March 20, pandemic-related tensions came to a head in another prisoner uprising, this time in Aligudarz Prison in the same province.⁸¹ Meanwhile, Head of Lorestan prisons Abdolmajid Keshvari described Iranian prisons as "some of the safest places in the country" because "all the capacities of the [Prisons] organization have been put to use to raise security and hygiene levels from the initial days of the outbreak." He also announced the deployment of special units of the Law Enforcement to all the province's prisons.⁸²

At Tabriz Prison, inmates concerned about the quarantine-free admission of new prisoners and delays in temporary leave proceedings staged a protest on March 26 demanding sit-downs with judicial officials. Smoke and the sound of gunfire were observed at the site.⁸³ On the evening of March 27, 40 inmates escaped Saqqez Prison during clashes with guards.⁸⁴ One of the Saqqez

⁷⁵ Aftab News, March 29, 2020 (<https://aftabnews.ir/fa/news/643956>)

⁷⁶ HRANA, March 26, 2020 (<https://www.hra-news.org/2020/hranews/a-24252/>)

⁷⁷ Report collected by ABC from source with knowledge of Greater Tehran, April 2, 2020. This date has been corrected from "late November" following the original publication of this report.

⁷⁸ HRANA, April 6, 2020 (<https://www.hra-news.org/2020/hranews/a-24333/>)

⁷⁹ Interview with source with knowledge of Langarud Prison, April 4, 2020.

⁸⁰ IRNA, March 19, 2020 (<https://www.irna.ir/news/83721575>)

⁸¹ HRANA, March 26, 2020 (<https://www.hra-news.org/2020/hranews/a-24253/>)

⁸² Lorestan Prisons, April 6, 2020 (<https://bit.ly/3b7VLf7>)

⁸³ HRANA, March 26, 2020 (<https://www.hra-news.org/2020/hranews/a-24253/>)

⁸⁴ HRANA, March 27, 2020 (<https://www.hra-news.org/2020/hranews/a-24257/>)

escapees — Mostafa Salimi, who had a capital sentence — was returned to the prison and executed on April 11.⁸⁵

On March 28, prisoners at Alvand Prison (Hamedan) set fire to blankets among other protest actions; a number attempted escape, and the sound of gunfire was heard in the vicinity.⁸⁶ According to Hamedan Prosecutor Hossein Khanjani, calm was restored by the end of the day. He acknowledged that the tensions arose from concerns about the spread of the virus among prisoners, along with the fact that some eligible prisoners have yet to be granted leave from prison. Khanjani claimed that 2,330 prisoners were released in Hamedan to prevent the spread of coronavirus, although it is unclear whether this number was skewed by the incorporation of older, unrelated releases.⁸⁷



Tabriz Prison
Telegram Channel of @VahidOnline,
March 26, 2020

On the morning of March 29, clashes broke out at Mahabad Prison during which security forces deployed tear gas and opened fire on inmates: one prisoner was reported killed and five were wounded.⁸⁸ West Azerbaijan Ministry of Justice Head Ali Akbar Garrousi described the incident as a “brief problem” at the prison solved through the “effective presence of provincial officials and law enforcement units.”⁸⁹ Juvenile offender Danial Zeinolabedini was subsequently transferred from Mahabad to Miandoab Prison. On March 31, Zeinolabedini told his family by phone that he had been severely beaten. On April 2 he died in custody.⁹⁰

On the night of March 29, inmates at Adelabad Prison (Shiraz, Fars Province) clashed with guards.⁹¹

On March 30, videos circulated on social media in which smoke is visible inside the walls of Sepidar Prison (Ahvaz, Khuzestan Province) and gunshots could be heard. According to Amnesty International, the Sepidar protest “appears to have started after authorities reneged on earlier

⁸⁵ HRANA, April 11, 2020 (<https://www.hra-news.org/2020/hranews/a-24371/>)

⁸⁶ HRANA, March 30, 2020 (<https://www.hra-news.org/2020/hranews/a-24274/>).

⁸⁷ Shapurkhasht News, Hamedan, March 29, 2020 (<https://bit.ly/2xCOO71>). According to the Head of the Hamedan Judiciary, Mohammad Reza Edalatkhah, between March 21, 2019 and March 20, 2020, a total of 2,600 prisoners were released from Hamedan Province prisons. 1,985 prisoners were given leave for the remainder of their sentences, 495 were pardoned, and 181 were released thanks to the efforts of Hamedan’s Dieh Headquarters, which provides or raises funds to pay blood money owed by prisoners who cannot afford to pay. TNews, April 5, 2020 (<http://tnews.ir/news/655b157642599.html?refc=11>)

⁸⁸ Hengaw Organization for Human Rights, March 29, 2020 (<https://bit.ly/345OTfJ>);

⁸⁹ Mizan News Agency, March 29, 2020 (<https://www.mizanonline.com/fa/news/608848>)

⁹⁰ Amnesty International, April 9, 2020 (<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/04/iran-prisoners-killed-by-security-forces-during-covid19-pandemic-protests/>)

⁹¹ The head of the Ministry of Justice in Fars Province said inmates there had broken bars and security cameras, and that prison guards, law enforcement, and security forces had responded. Mizan News Agency, March 30, 2020 (<https://www.mizanonline.com/fa/news/608901>)

promises to release prisoners who the authorities do not have specific security concerns about.”⁹² Authorities’ responses to protests included the use of firearms against inmates. In addressing the incident, Military Governor of Khuzestan Province Commander Heydar Abbaszadeh stated that prisoners in Ward 2 of the facility sought to create a disturbance and were setting fire to trash cans when order was restored by the “timely presence of law enforcement and security forces” and that “no prisoners were harmed.”⁹³ Independent sources, however, have provided the names of 15 prisoners who have died⁹⁴ and 13 who were injured: the whereabouts of these injured were not known as of two days after the event.⁹⁵

Smoke, gunfire sounds, and ambulance traffic were reported at Ahvaz Central Prison (Sheyban, Bavi County, Khuzestan) on March 31.⁹⁶ According to Commander Abbaszadeh, “prisoners in four wards of [Ahvaz] intended to create unrest and chaos, but the unrest was controlled and calm was reinstated with the timely intervention of law and security forces.”⁹⁷ Meanwhile, independent sources have published the names of at least eight prisoners wounded by direct gunfire in the course of the clashes. In all, 17 were reportedly injured while 14 were transferred to an unknown location before being returned to Ahvaz Central on April 13.⁹⁸



From top left: Majid Zobeidi, Mohammad Tamouli, Soroush Makvandi, Shahin Zahiri, Reza Khorasani, Mohammad Salamat, Sajad Abayat, Adel Naseri, Ali Zargani, - Inmates Reported Dead in Clashes at Sepidar Prison, Ahvaz
Telegram Channel of @Khakzadegan

The current hygiene situation in prisons justifies prisoner fears. Without a serious and systematic effort, the spread of the virus in susceptible populations inside prisons, and from there to the outside community, is only a matter of time. Iran can and must take more concerted action to prevent mass infection within its detention centers, not the least of which would be removing obstacles to the release of prisoners convicted or detained for non-violent crimes. It must provide sufficient means to prison authorities to implement the recommended measures and monitor the implementation. It

⁹² Amnesty International, April 9, 2020 (<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/04/iran-prisoners-killed-by-security-forces-during-covid19-pandemic-protests/>)

⁹³ Fararu, March 30, 2020 (<https://fararu.com/fa/news/434904/>)

⁹⁴ Telegram channel of Khakzadegan, April 11, 2020 (<https://t.me/KhakZadegan/14889>)

⁹⁵ Telegram Channel Khakzadegan, April 2, 2020 (<https://t.me/KhakZadegan/14810>)

⁹⁶ HRANA, April 2, 2020 (<https://www.hra-news.org/2020/hranews/a-24299/>)

⁹⁷ IRNA, March 31, 2020 (<https://www.irna.ir/news/83734837/>)

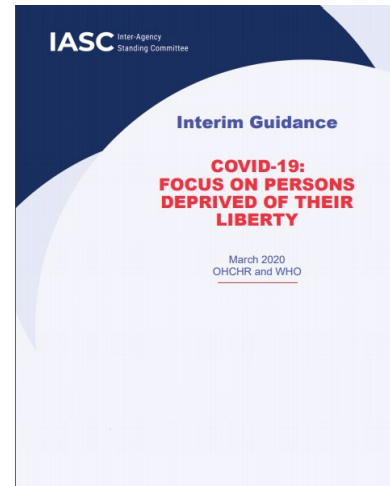
⁹⁸ HRANA, April 6, 2020 (<https://www.hra-news.org/2020/hranews/a-24333/>).

Telegram channel: Khakzadegan, April 7 (<https://t.me/KhakZadegan/14842>) and April 14 (<https://t.me/KhakZadegan/14929>)

should allow independent monitoring by providing access to prisons to local and international groups who have the expertise to support prison officials in their efforts.

The international community has made clear, detailed recommendations in guideline form for the use of governments faced with the pandemic. In their interim guidance on COVID-19 for persons deprived of liberty, the World Health Organization and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights have made key recommendations “[aimed] at addressing the specific issues of persons deprived of their liberty with the responsible services and ministries”. These include:

- “Public authorities should take immediate steps to address prison overcrowding, including measures to respect WHO guidance on social distancing and other health measures. Release of individuals, including children, persons with underlying health conditions, persons with low risk profiles and who have committed minor and petty offences, persons with imminent release dates and those detained for offences not recognized under international law, should be prioritized.”
- “Information on preventive health measures should be provided to all persons deprived of their liberty in a language and format they understand and that is accessible....”
- “In suspected or confirmed cases of COVID-19 all persons deprived of their liberty should be able to access healthcare, including urgent, specialised health care, without undue delay... Detention centres’ administrations should develop close links with community health services and other health-care providers”
- Limitation of persons in pre-trial detention and implementation of non-custodial measures (see Tokyo Rules) can be an effective measure that reduces risks of spreading COVID-19, which is beneficial for both detainees and law enforcement staff. Discharge is the earliest possible non-custodial measure which authorities are encouraged to apply, as applicable, at the pre-trial stage
- Human rights networks, National Human Rights Institutions and civil society organizations accessing detention centers should gather information, conduct health assessments, activate available monitoring on situations in places of detention and identify advocacy opportunities.
- All detainees should have access to medical care and treatment without discrimination... Pro-active measures and monitoring should be put in place to ensure that essential personal hygiene items such as soap and sanitizer, as well as menstrual items for women and girls, are made available at no cost throughout their continued use beyond initial distribution point.
- The substitution of in-person family visits by other measures, such as videoconferences, electronic communication and increased telephone communications (pay phones or mobile phones) may require sustained organizational effort from the place of detention administration. Any interference with privacy or family must not be arbitrary or unlawful.



- While some preventive measures will alter family life including prison visitation, states should minimize creating avoidable rise in anxiety and stress levels, especially among children and the elderly.

The World Health Organization has specified detailed guidelines to be observed by prison officials, including⁹⁹:

- “Prison authorities should be informed and made aware of the hospitals to which they can transfer those requiring admission (respiratory support and/or intensive care units). Appropriate actions need to be taken for any confirmed cases, including transfer to specialist facilities for respiratory isolation and treatment, as required; appropriate escorts should be used and advice on safe transfers followed.”
- “Environmental and engineering controls intended to reduce the spread of pathogens and contamination of surfaces and inanimate objects should be in place; this should include provision of adequate space between people, adequate air exchange, and routine disinfection of the environment (preferably at least once daily).”
- “Consideration should be given to measures such as distributing food in rooms/cells instead of a common canteen; or splitting out-of-cell time, which could be divided by wing/unit to avoid concentration of prisoners/staff even in open spaces. With these caveats, access of prisoners to the open air should be maintained and not fall below a minimum of one hour per day.”

ABC calls upon Iranian officials to heed these and other relevant recommendations to ensure a response to the COVID-19 crisis that is effective and fully consistent with human rights norms.

Iran is responsible for protecting prisoners, as self-protection is not an option for people deprived of liberty in overcrowded prisons. Bullets and beatings are not effective responses to prisoners’ well-founded expressions of fear. In the context of a pandemic, prisoners’ families live in a state of dread. The disappearance of those who participated in the unrest, including those who were shot or injured, added to their anguish. Withholding vital information, blaming prison unrest on social media and the outside world,¹⁰⁰ and bringing in special forces rather than addressing root causes of unrest are typical responses of Islamic Republic leaders faced with popular discontent. In today’s context, such responses only exacerbate tensions within prisons and increase the number of people exposed in an unsanitary environment.

COVID-19 has yet to prompt Iranian authorities to be transparent and face facts. In response to information published on April 16, 2020 regarding the unsanitary conditions of Qarchak prison, Heshmatollah Hayatolghaib, head of Tehran Province prisons, stated that in order to fight

⁹⁹ “Preparedness, Prevention and Control of COVID-19 in Prisons and Other Places of Detention,” World Health Organization, March 15, 2020 (<https://www.iranrights.org/library/document/3718>)

¹⁰⁰ Prisons Organization head Jahangir accused foreign enemies of attempting to incite prisoners by circulating false claims on social media that their health was not receiving due attention and to otherwise cast doubt on Iranian officials’ efforts to control the virus in prisons. Tasnim News, April 6, 2020 (<https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1399/01/18/2237129>)

coronavirus, 360 liters of disinfectant, 1,008 bottles of hand sanitizer, 1,460 bottles of surface sanitizer liquid, 18,250 pairs of disposable gloves, and 12,000 masks had been distributed to prisoners free of charge.¹⁰¹ Mehrzad Tashakorian, who heads Prison Health and Treatment in Tehran Province, insisted that prisoners' temperatures and vital signs are taken every day per a standardized protocol distributed to prisons and that his organization receives regular reports on the prisoners' health. When asked about the number of prisoners infected in prisons, Tashakorian said that he is not authorized to disclose numbers.¹⁰² Earlier, on April 5, the head of the Prisons Organization claimed that "health and medical teams have been established in various prisons and are monitoring and examining prisoners daily," that "all prisoners, even those with symptoms of cold and fever, have been separated from other inmates," that "prison common areas are disinfected twice a day," and that "we have not had a single case of coronavirus-related death in any prison so far."¹⁰³

The pandemic provides an opportunity to advocate for long-needed change in prison administration policies, in line with Iran's international obligations on the treatment of prisoners ([Mandela Rules](#)).¹⁰⁴ But misleading official statements, along with the judiciary's customary lack of transparency, are not reassuring; more consequentially, they fail to incentivize decision makers to take urgent steps that could effectively curb the virus's spread in prisons across the country. For inmates in an enclosed environment faced with substandard hygiene levels, the provision of daily disinfections in every ward with proper products and sufficient water (including hot water) and soap is not a luxury. It is a basic, minimum step that allow prisoners to protect themselves and others and ensure that prisoners' rights to health and to life are protected. The international community must press Iran to take these minimum steps and allow independent monitoring of prisons.

Iran, like many other countries around the world, is struggling to manage an extremely contagious and deadly virus. This is no justification for keeping people behind bars who do not belong in prison, including hundreds of political prisoners, prisoners of conscience, those who are eligible for release but cannot afford bail, and those who do not represent a danger to society. The authorities must also stop incarcerating recently arrested individuals, those convicted of offenses not recognized under international law, and those charged with minor crimes. If Iran does not enact effective preventive measures, adequate early-detection protocols, quarantine, and proper treatment of prisoners who are infected, in accordance with international guidelines, it can expect mass spread of a virus that has already stricken scores of staff and inmates, as well as more prison unrest. The current state of Iranian prisons is not linked to the current economic hardship and sanctions: it stems from bad laws and a clear lack of political will to ensure prisoners' human rights for which Iran should be held accountable.

¹⁰¹ Quoting Mehr News, April 16, 2020 (<https://bit.ly/3aohQoN>)

¹⁰² Khabar Online, April 16, 2020 (<https://www.khabaronline.ir/news/1377364>)

¹⁰³ Tasnim News, April 5, 2020 (<https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1399/01/17/2236838>); Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting, April 6, 2020 (<http://www.iribnews.ir/fa/news/2684434/>)

¹⁰⁴ United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, 2015 (the Mandela Rules) (<https://www.iranrights.org/library/document/3721>)



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