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Satellite images show Iran has built mass graves amid coronavirus outbreak

Trenches in city of Qom confirm worst fears about extent of the epidemic and the government's subsequent cover-up

Julian Borger *in Washington*

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Satellite images of mass graves in the city of Qom suggest Iran's coronavirus epidemic is even more serious than the authorities are admitting.

The pictures, first published by the New York Times, show the excavation of a new section in a cemetery on the northern fringe of Iran's holy city in late February, and two long trenches dug, of a total length of 100 yards, by the end of the month.

They confirm the worst fears about the extent of the epidemic and the government's subsequent cover-up. On 24 February, at the time the trenches were being dug, a legislator from Qom, 75 miles (120 km) south of Tehran, accused the health ministry of lying about the scale of the outbreak, saying there had already been 50 deaths in the city, at a time when the ministry was claiming only 12 people had died from the virus nationwide.

The deputy health minister, Iraj Harirchi, held a press conference to "categorically deny" the allegations, but he was clearly sweating and coughing as he did so. The next day, Harirchi

confirmed that he had tested positive for the Covid-19 virus.

Since then, members of Iranian parliament, the Majlis, a former diplomat and a senior adviser to the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, have died. Another Khamenei adviser and one of the most powerful voices in Iranian foreign policy, Ali Akbar Velayati, was reported on Thursday to have been infected. The top ranks of Iran's clerical leadership are particularly vulnerable because of their advanced age.

According to the latest health ministry figures, more than 10,000 Iranians have fallen ill from the virus and 429 have died.

Amir Afkhami, who has written a history of Iran's experience of cholera epidemics, *A Modern Contagion*, said the mass graves add weight to suspicions the real mortality figures are much higher and are still being covered by the leadership.

"It doesn't surprise me that they are now trying to create mass graves and trying to hide the actual extent of the impact of the disease," Dr Afkhami, an associate professor at George Washington University, said.

He added that the close trading partnership between Iran and China, and the government's fear of disrupting that partnership had contributed to the early and rapid spread of the disease.

"Because of China's status as the country's principal commercial partner, the Iranian government took inadequate cautionary measures to restrict and monitor travelers from China," Dr Afkhami said. "Then, later on, Tehran's lack of transparency and unwillingness to take robust measures such as social distancing and quarantine, particularly at the epicenter of the outbreak, helped spread the virus."

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