Iranian Lawyer: Jailed Dissidents Endangered by Virus as Iran Refuses Furloughs

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<https://www.voanews.com/science-health/coronavirus-outbreak/iranian-lawyer-jailed-dissidents-endangered-virus-iran-refuses>

A prominent Iranian lawyer is adding his voice to warnings that Iran’s rulers are endangering political prisoners by not temporarily releasing them from jails where the coronavirus appears to be spreading.

Speaking to VOA Persian from Iran in a Tuesday interview, Saleh Nikbakht said Iranian prisons are “very dangerous hot spots” for the virus due to overcrowding of inmates and the inability of prison authorities to facilitate social distancing.

“If the judiciary does not reduce Iran’s prison population to one-eighth [of its pre-pandemic size], this is going to be highly dangerous for [remaining] prisoners,” Nikbakht said.

A U.N. report has cited Iran as saying its prison population was at 189,500 last year, prior to a wave of arrests starting in November when authorities violently suppressed days of nationwide anti-government protests. [The January report](https://undocs.org/en/A/HRC/43/61), submitted by the U.N. special rapporteur on human rights in Iran, Javaid Rehman, to the Human Rights Council, said the prison population figure was 27.7 percent higher than the official capacity of Iran’s prisons.

**Expanded furloughs**

Iran’s judiciary announced Sunday that it had expanded the number of prisoners granted furloughs to 100,000 from 85,000 inmates who had been temporarily released earlier in March to try to curb the spread of the virus inside prisons. The judiciary also said the furloughs would be extended until April 19.

Among the tens of thousands of inmates still behind bars are Iranians charged with political crimes designated as “security” offenses and represented in some cases by Nikbakht. In televised remarks on March 3, judiciary spokesman Gholamhossein Esmaili said Iran would not furlough security prisoners serving more than five-year sentences, prompting an outcry from [human rights activists and family members seeking the release of some of those inmates](https://www.voanews.com/middle-east/voa-news-iran/virus-threat-political-prisoners-iran-prompts-growing-cries-help).

Several prisoners who have been refused furloughs are Iranians with dual American nationality whom the U.S. has accused Iran of taking hostage as part of long-running U.S.-Iran tensions.

Iran granted a temporary release to one American prisoner who is not a dual national, Michael White, on March 19, and did the same for jailed British-Iranian aid worker Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe two days earlier.

“Although furloughing some political prisoners is a welcome step by the Iranian justice system, it is too little and too late,” Nikbakht said. “Freeing [those] prisoners cannot reduce the life-threatening risk [of the virus] to the other [remaining] prisoners.”

**Lack of data**

Iran has not released data on coronavirus cases inside its prisons, but human rights activists began reporting apparent outbreaks in several major prisons in early March.

Iranian state media have reported several disturbances inside prisons in recent days, coinciding with a worsening of a national pandemic that has killed thousands of Iranians and made Iran the hardest-hit country in the Middle East.

In one incident, state media said rioting inmates broke cameras and caused other damage to the Adel Abad prison in the south-central city of Shiraz on Monday. They said 70 inmates escaped from another prison in the western city of Saqqez on Friday.