



Spotlight on Iran



January 6, 2012—Dey 17, 1391

Editor: Dr. Raz Zimmt

Tehran holds its breath as severe air pollution shuts down the city

This weekend all services in Tehran—with the exception of emergency services—were shut down due to severe air pollution. The authorities in the capital city decided to shut down the government ministries, educational institutions, as well as economic and financial institutions, and imposed severe restrictions on the movement of private vehicles as a consequence of the dangerous levels of pollution. Tehran and other major Iranian cities were also shut down last week as a result of abnormally high levels of air pollution.

Air pollution is considered one of the most serious problems in Iran, with Tehran considered one of the most polluted cities in the world. According to official estimates, between 4 and 5 thousand people die each year as a result of air pollution. Private vehicles are considered the main source of pollution in the big cities.

The current crisis has provoked another round of mutual accusations between the various government institutions on the extent of their responsibility for the situation. The Iranian media gave extensive coverage of the issue and proposed possible infrastructural solutions, mainly to improve the quality of fuels and increase the use of public transportation.

The severe air pollution also drew numerous comments from news website readers and social network users. Many Iranians said they were frustrated with the health-threatening air pollution, the shutdown of the city, and the restrictions imposed on the movement of private vehicles.

This weekend all services in Tehran—with the exception of emergency services—were shut down once again due to severe air pollution. As a consequence of the severe levels of pollution, the authorities decided to shut down the government ministries, schools, universities, banks, and all other economic and financial institutions in Tehran Province on Saturday, January 5. During the weekend, Morteza Tamaddon, the governor of Tehran Province, also asked factories and private companies to suspend their operations in order to bring down pollution levels. The decision to put activities in the province on hold this weekend comes about a week after Tehran and other major cities in Iran, including Arak, Qom, Esfahan, and Tabriz, were shut down as a result of abnormally high levels of air pollution.

The authorities not only shut down Tehran but also imposed severe restrictions on the movement of private vehicles in the capital. In addition, ambulances were deployed at five central squares in the city to provide medical care to those residents who might require it. The chairman of the emergency health services advised those who reside in the capital, particularly children, pregnant women, elderly people, and people who are ill, not to leave their homes unless it is absolutely necessary and use masks to protect themselves from the dangerous air pollution. He also advised the residents to refrain from physical activity outdoors and to use public transportation.

Air pollution is considered one of the most severe environmental problems in Iran. This is particularly true for Tehran, which is considered one of the most polluted cities in the world. The city has been shut down on several occasions in recent years due to abnormal levels of pollution. The efforts made by the authorities to fight the air pollution by imposing restrictions on the use of private vehicles, developing the subway system, and reducing the use of low-quality fuel have so far been unsuccessful. Mostafa Pour-Mohammadi, the chief of the National Inspection Organization in the judiciary, reported last week that 22.5 million residents of Iran live in cities plagued by air pollution. The director of the company that monitors the air quality in Tehran said recently that during the last year there were 320 days in which excessive air pollution was registered in Tehran. According to official estimates, between 4 and 5 thousand people die each year as a result of air pollution.

Mutual accusations over the air pollution crisis

The air pollution crisis has provoked another round of mutual accusations between the various government institutions on the extent of their responsibility for the situation. Ali-

Mohammad Sha'eri, a top official at the Environment Protection Organization, criticized the Petroleum Ministry for not following through on its promises to have factories, refineries, and power plants switch from mazut to natural gas. According to Sha'eri, despite the fact that air pollution cannot be completely prevented under certain weather conditions, the level of air pollution can be reduced if the ministries of petroleum, industry, and commerce, the Tehran municipality, and the armed forces take the necessary measures.

Mohammad Javad Nazari Mehr, member of the Majles Health Committee, accused the government and those apparatuses working under it, particularly the Environment Protection Organization, of shrugging off responsibility for the crisis. He said that the organization contented itself with presenting theoretical solutions and did not take any real measures that are needed to reduce the air pollution, such as enforcing strict standards in the manufacturing of fuel and cars, monitoring factories, and taking polluting cars off the road.

Majles member Mohammad Sadat Ebrahimi said that this coming week the Majles intends to discuss the problem of air pollution in Tehran and the issue of responsibility for the crisis. He said that the problem needs to be dealt with at the root cause instead of simply shutting down the city whenever there is air pollution. According to Ebrahimi, the Environment Protection Organization needs to ensure the use of good-quality fuels that meet the standards and provide the Majles with a report on the issue.

In response to the criticism directed at the Environment Protection Organization, Mohammad Javad Mohammadzadeh, deputy president and chief of that organization, said that the various institutions had better focus on meeting their responsibility for improving the situation instead of accusing each other. He noted that this past year there has been an improvement in air pollution figures in comparison with last year (Tabnak, January 3).



Possible solutions to the pollution crisis

In recent days the Iranian media has provided extensive coverage of the issue and discussed possible solutions to reduce the pollution levels. The daily Resalat warned that air pollution in Tehran has become a chronic, all-encompassing crisis. In an article published under the title “Ongoing Air Pollution in the Capital: Tehran has Lost its Breath”, the daily called on all the government bodies to cooperate with each other so that a solution to the problem can be found. The daily said that implementing short-term programs to fight the air pollution is ineffective, and that what is needed is united, extensive, and long-term cooperation within a coordinated executive framework. Resalat took issue with the fact that the authorities have yet to adopt a comprehensive, practical policy aimed at solving the crisis, and wondered how it is that the problem of air pollution in Iran’s cities becomes one of the main preoccupations of the Iranian press each year, only to be forgotten after the air pollution temporarily goes away (Resalat, January 5).

The reformist daily Shargh, which resumed publishing last week after having been closed down by the authorities several months ago, provided an in-depth report on the shutdown of Tehran and discussed the question of whether there are no ways to deal with the crisis other than to shut the city down. According to the daily, the experience of other cities in the world has shown that there are no possible solutions with the exception of enforcing stricter laws on environment protection and taking action against pollution emitters. A number of experts interviewed by Shargh argued that shutting

down cities is the only possible solution in the short term despite the economic damage involved in it. However, they stressed the need for finding infrastructural solutions having to do with fuel use, transportation policy, and urban planning.

The experts stressed that private vehicles, whose number in Tehran grows by 1500 every day, are responsible for 70 to 80 percent of the air pollution in the big cities, while the factories are only responsible for less than 10 percent of the pollution. Accordingly, the main solutions to solve the air pollution problem lie in changing car import legislation, setting stringent standards for fuels, and further developing the public transportation infrastructure at the expense of developing the road infrastructure intended to accommodate private vehicles. In addition, the situation in Iran's villages and smaller cities needs to be improved to curb the phenomenon of immigration to Tehran, which suffers from a high population density as it is (Shargh, January 5).

The economic daily *Donya-ye Eqtesad*, too, suggested adopting a long-term policy to deal with the air pollution crisis. An editorial titled "F in Managing the Crisis" said that, in addition to immediate solutions, there has to be a comprehensive, extensive policy for the long term. The daily suggested upgrading the transportation management policy in a way that will reflect the new know-how and technologies in this field, boosting the public transportation system and reducing its cost, increasing standards for locally-produced fuel from Euro 2 to Euro 4, taking old cars off the road, and encouraging Iranians to switch to public transportation—for instance, by making it more expensive to park in the cities.

The daily argued that, since the severe air pollution was predictable, the authorities should have taken the necessary measures in advance to avoid reaching such high levels of pollution. If the authorities imposed restrictions on the use of private vehicles in the cities and raised the prices of fuel and the cost of parking in the cities, it would not be necessary to shut down all economic activity in Tehran (*Donya-ye Eqtesad*, January 5).

The reformist daily *E'temad* also listed a number of measures that may improve the air pollution situation, such as introducing more green areas in the cities and increasing the number of vehicle testing centers. The daily said that, in accordance with existing legislation, new vehicles are not required to undergo testing for 5 years. *E'temad* also called for extending the subway system in Tehran despite the differences of opinion

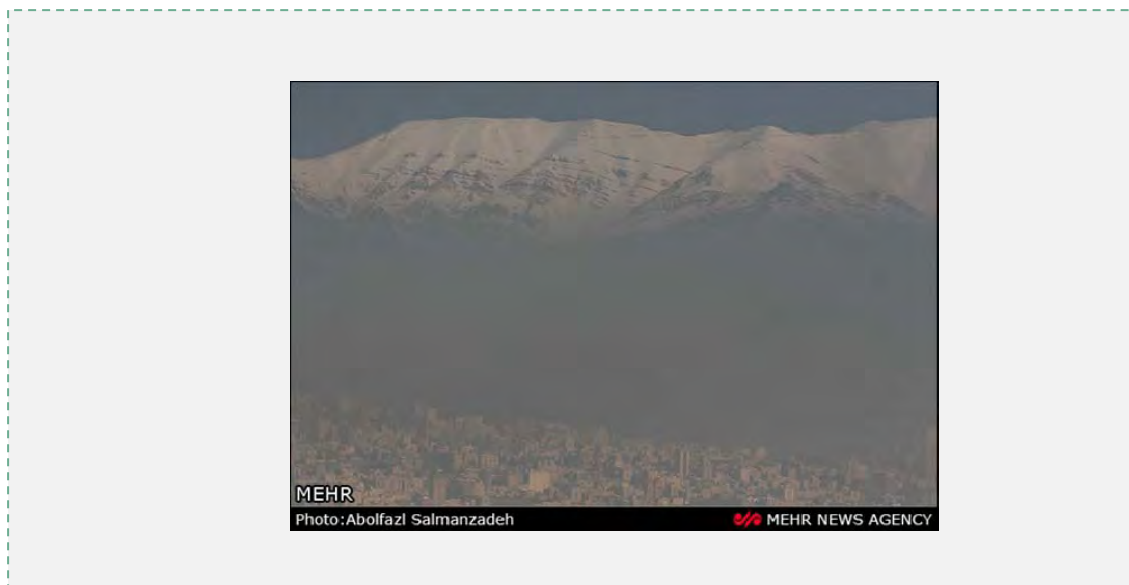
between the government and the Tehran municipality, which have delayed further development of the subway (E'temad, January 5).

In recent years there has been a heated debate between the Tehran municipality and the government over the government assistance to the subway system. The Tehran municipality and the subway management claim that in recent years the government has not been contributing its part of the budget required for the operation and development of the subway. The government, on the other hand, claims that the severe economic problems facing the subway are the result of mismanagement. Government critics claim that the government's refusal to provide the necessary assistance for the operation of the subway is mostly driven by political considerations that have to do with the fierce political rivalry between President Ahmadinejad and Tehran's mayor Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf.

“Tehran has become a gas chamber”: reactions on social networks

The severe air pollution also drew numerous comments from news website readers and social network users. Many Iranians said they were frustrated with the health-threatening air pollution and the shutdown of the city caused by the abnormal levels of pollution.

Many web users said that shutting down the city will not help to solve the problem and proposed alternative solutions, mainly to improve the public transportation system and increase the quality of fuels. Several web users took issue with the high prices of public transportation, which require them to continue using their private vehicles. A number of Iranians called for a shutdown of the petrochemical companies and large auto companies which, they said, are responsible for the severe air pollution. One web user said that, instead of shutting down the city, what needs to be done is to put on trial those responsible for the underdeveloped state of the subway system and those responsible for manufacturing polluting, carcinogenic fuel at the petrochemical plants. Another web surfer defined the situation as “The greatest holocaust in history: killing people in the great gas chamber called Tehran”.



Other online comments dealt with the restrictions imposed on the movement of private vehicles. While some Iranians justified the need for such restrictions, others said that they are making it more difficult for them to go about their daily business. One web user took issue with the fact that he is not allowed to use his private vehicle whenever he would like, even though he pays his car insurance and taxes for 365 days a year.

Of particular note were the online comments made by numerous Iranian university students who had to deal with cancelled classes and exams. Many of the students complained about the situation, although some of them said they were happy that school was cancelled. One of the students was hopeful that the universities would remain closed in the beginning of the week: “I have a difficult exam on Sunday”, he said.