
Iran develops homegrown AI software to speed up coronavirus tests

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Tehran has unveiled new artificial intelligence software to speed up detection of the Covid-19 virus. With US sanctions restricting access to testing kits, necessity forced one of the region's hardest-hit countries to innovate.

The software was revealed by government officials in Tehran on Saturday. Developed by a consortium of Iranian universities in only one month, it uses artificial intelligence to analyze computed tomography (CT) scans of potentially infected lungs, allowing doctors to upload images and instantly receive results.

Wearing a face mask at the press conference, Iranian Vice President for Science and Technology Sorena Sattari told reporters that the breakthrough will ease the workload on analysts – who previously had to manually pore over hundreds of pictures per day – and bring a "new perspective" to the diagnosis and treatment of the virus.

CT imaging allows physicians to spot abnormalities on patients' lungs, indicating a Covid-19 infection. However, the method has been sidelined around the world in favor of polymerase chain reaction (PCR) testing, which looks for the virus' genetic material instead of its symptoms.

US sanctions have hampered Iran's access to medical equipment, forcing the country's scientists to innovate. However, studies have shown that CT scans are more reliable than the PCR method. A Chinese research paper published just over a month ago recommended it be used as a "primary tool" in testing for Covid-19.

Iran is one of the countries hit hardest by the pandemic in the Middle East. More than 55,000 cases have been confirmed in the Islamic Republic, and nearly 3,500 people have died. The virus has claimed the lives of religious leader Ayatollah Hashem Bathayi Golpayegani, along with at least 12 sitting or former politicians.

Efforts to contain the spread of the virus have been constrained by the US' economic sanctions on Iran. The

leadership in Tehran has argued that, by blacklisting its oil industry, the US has cut off a vital revenue stream that could be used to procure life-saving medicine and equipment. In a televised address on Wednesday, President Hassan Rouhani said that the coronavirus crisis is “a great opportunity for Americans to apologize... and to lift the unjust and unfair sanctions on Iran.”
