Under Iranian sanctions, life and death: Opinion

By Star-Ledger Guest Columnist

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New American sanctions against Iran took effect Jan. 6. The measures will effectively lock up Iranian oil revenue overseas and sharply restrict Iran’s use of this revenue for bilateral trade.

The Iranian government has so far survived the sanctions by using unconventional methods of international trade and money transfers. Lacking the resources and the ability to maneuver the markets, many Iranians have, however, become the collateral damage in the economic warfare.

Sanctions are modern economic warfare, disproportionally affecting civilians. The widespread suffering of the Iranian people dispels the myth of smart and targeted sanctions. While sanctions stifle life for millions of Iranians, they have failed to halt, or even slow, Iran’s nuclear activities.

Iran’s oil revenues dropped by nearly 50 percent last year. Meanwhile, a banking embargo severely limited the government’s ability to have access to its foreign exchange reserves, helping trigger a currency crisis last October. The rial plummeted and the dollar increased from 10,000 to more than 30,000 rials. It trades at 40,000 rials now.

The depreciation of the rial has also resulted in sharp increases in prices of imported parts and materials used in domestic manufacturing. Unable to weather the storm, many manufacturers shut down their operations and laid off their workers.

Automobile production dropped by 42 percent between March and September 2012. A large number of auto parts producers are manufacturing at 40 percent capacity. Many have shut down operation completely. Similar conditions prevail in other industries.

The plummeting of the rial has also resulted in sharp price increases. Food inflation is currently at 50 percent. The rise in prices is most noticeable in the case of many imported drugs and medical equipment. Affordability has drastically diminished for many Iranians. In recent months, the price of X-ray film increased 240 percent.
and MRI helium by 677 percent. The cost of one cycle of chemotherapy nearly tripled.

The economic data, however, fail to reveal the extent of the pain inflicted on ordinary people as a result of sanctions. Petty crimes, burglary, car theft, street fighting caused by random quarrels, and mugging with knives and machetes have been on the rise.

To calm the public, the government recently hanged a group of men convicted of mugging with knife. In an unprecedented act, local authorities in Shiraz publicly cut off the hand of a 29-year-old thief in January.

Despite these harsh actions, urban violence and theft continue. Fearing armed mugging and violent attacks, many elderly residents of Tehran remain home after dark.

Across the country, the public is edgy and irritated. Arguments and disagreements frequently lead to physical violence.

Every day, 1,800 people with injuries from street quarrels are referred to coroner’s offices. Many injuries go unreported. There are currently 48,000 reported cases of fighting-related injuries under review.

Air quality has not been spared from the negative effects of sanctions. Tehran is facing a public health crisis that threatens millions with cancer, heart ailments and respiratory diseases. Nearly 4,500 people died of pollution-related diseases between March 2011 and 2012.

Facing unusual pollution in the closing weeks of 2012, the government called venturing into the city tantamount to “suicide.” It shut down state offices, banks and schools for recurring five-day periods.

Surrounded by mountains, Tehran is a trap for emissions from old car engines, and other sources of pollution. The recent surge in pollution has, however, a new source. Unable to produce sufficient high-grade gasoline in its refineries, Iran relied on imports to meet its rising domestic demand in recent years. Gas imports sharply declined because of the ban on selling gasoline to Iran. The Islamic Republic increased the production and use of deadly low-grade gasoline with high levels of pollutants inside the country. Pollution jumped to deadly levels in Tehran, Isfahan and other cities.

While preparing for the New Year on March 20, Iranians are bracing themselves for more economic hardship, and a looming social collapse.

“There is no light at the end of the tunnel,” a relative told me.

Sanctions hurt in more than one way.

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