Moscow targets Chinese with raids amid virus fears

February 23 2020, by Daria Litvinova and Francesca Ebel

In this photo taken on Friday, Feb. 21, 2020, medical workers disinfect rooms in the sanatorium after quarantine period has ended in Bogandinsky in the Tyumen region, about 2150 kilometers (1344 miles) east of Moscow, Russia. 144 people who were evacuated from the epicenter of the CONVID-19 coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan, China, and were released from a 14-day quarantine in western Siberia. None of them tested positive for the virus. Russian authorities are going to great lengths to prevent the new coronavirus from spreading in the capital and elsewhere.(AP Photo/Maxim Slutsky)

Bus drivers in Moscow kept their WhatsApp group chat buzzing with questions this week about what to do if they spotted passengers who might be from China riding with them in the Russian capital.

"Some Asian-looking (people) have just got on. Probably Chinese. Should I call (the police)?" one driver messaged his peers. "How do I figure out if they're Chinese? Should I ask them?" a colleague wondered.

The befuddlement reflected in screenshots of the group exchanges seen by The Associated Press had a common source - instructions from Moscow's public transit operator Wednesday for drivers to call a dispatcher if Chinese nationals boarded their buses, Russian media reported.

A leaked email that the media reports said was sent by the state-owned transportation company Mosgortrans told dispatchers who took such calls to notify the police. The email, which the company immediately described on Twitter as fake, carried a one-word subject line: coronavirus.

Since the outbreak of the new virus that has infected more than 76,000 people and killed more than 2,300 in mainland China, Russia has reported two cases. Both patients, Chinese nationals hospitalized in Siberia, recovered quickly. Russian authorities nevertheless are going to significant—some argue discriminatory—lengths to keep the virus from resurfacing and spreading.

In this photo taken on Friday, Feb. 21, 2020, Medical workers walk after checking passengers where a passenger was identified with suspected coronavirus after arriving from Kyiv at Kievsky (Kyiv's) rail station in Moscow, Russia. Russia suspended all trains to China and North Korea, shut down its land border with China and Mongolia and extended a school vacation for Chinese students until March 1. Russian authorities are going to great lengths to prevent the new coronavirus from spreading in the capital and elsewhere. (AP Photo/Alexander Zemlianichenko)

Moscow officials ordered police raids of hotels, dormitories, apartment buildings and businesses to track down the shrinking number of Chinese people remaining in the city. They also authorized the use of facial recognition technology to find those suspected of evading a 14-day self-quarantine period upon their arrival in Russia.

"Conducting raids is an unpleasant task, but it is necessary, for the potential carriers of the virus as well," Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin said in a statement outlining various methods to find and track Chinese people the city approved as a virus prevention strategy.

The effort to identify Chinese citizens on public transportation applies not only to buses, but underground trains and street trams in Moscow, Russian media reported Wednesday.

Metro workers were instructed to stop riders from China and ask them to fill out questionnaires asking why they were in Russia and whether they observed the two-week quarantine, the reports said. The forms also ask respondents for their health condition and the address of where they are were staying.

In this photo taken on Saturday, Feb. 22, 2020, two surveillance camera are seen in a street in Moscow, Russia. Moscow's city officials announced a slew of policies aimed at tracking down the few Chinese nationals remaining in the city, including raids on hotels and the use of facial recognition technology to target people evading quarantine. (AP Photo/Alexander Zemlianichenko)

In Yekaterinburg, a city located 1,790 kilometers (1,112 miles) away from Moscow in the Urals Mountains, members of the local Chinese community also are under watch. Self-styled Cossack patrols in the city hand out medical masks along with strong recommendations to visit a health clinic to Chinese residents.

Human rights advocates have condemned the targeting of Chinese nationals as racial profiling, not an effective epidemic control strategy.

"Prevention of any serious virus, be it a flu or the new coronavirus, should involve a proper information campaign and not discrimination of other people," said Alyona Popova, an activist engaged in a year-long court challenge of Moscow's use of facial recognition technology.

The containment measures in the capital came as the Russian government instituted an indefinite ban on Chinese nationals entering the country that could block up to 90% of travelers coming to Russia from China. Weeks before, Russia shut down the country's long land border with China, suspended all trains and most flights between the two countries.

In this photo taken on Friday, Feb. 21, 2020, medic work to disinfect rooms in the sanatorium after quarantine period has ended in Bogandinsky in the Tyumen region, about 2150 kilometers (1344 miles) east of Moscow, Russia. 144 people who were evacuated from the epicenter of the CONVID-19 coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan, China, and were released from a 14-day quarantine in western Siberia. Russian authorities are going to great lengths to prevent the new coronavirus from spreading in the capital and elsewhere. (AP Photo/Maxim Slutsky)

An employee of a Moscow-based company that employs Chinese nationals told the AP on condition of anonymity that police officers came to their office on Thursday and asked a dozen Chinese staffers to stay home for two weeks. The visit took place a little more than two weeks after these staffers returned from China and went through health

checks at the airport, the employee said.

The employee spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak publicly about what had happened.

The Moscow Metro confirmed to The Associated Press that the underground system was "actively monitoring the stations" and has a protocol in place for dealing with people who "have recently returned from the People's Republic of China."

"We ask to see their documents and to show us documents (proving) that if they have recently returned from the People's Republic of China, they have undergone a two-week quarantine period," Yulia Temnikova, Moscow Metro's deputy chief of client and passenger services, said.

In this photo taken on Saturday, Feb. 22, 2020, passengers enter and exit cars in a Moscow's Metro station in Moscow, Russia. Metro workers were instructed to stop passengers from China and ask them to fill out a questionnaire about the purpose of their visit to Russia, address of residence, health condition and whether they underwent quarantine upon arrival. (AP Photo/Alexander Zemlianichenko)

If an individual does not show proof of completing the quarantine, Metro workers ask the person to fill out the form and call an ambulance, Temnikova said.

Bus and tram drivers contacted their labor union about the instructions to look for Chinese nationals and report them to the dispatch center. The drivers were outraged and didn't know what to do, Public Transport Workers Union chairman Yuri Dashkov said.

"So he saw a Chinese national, and then what?" Dashkov said. "How can he ascertain that he saw a Chinese national, or a Vietnamese national, or a Japanese, or (someone from the Russian region of) Yakutia?"

Dashkov showed the AP a photo of the email that officials at Mosgortrans were said to have sent out. He also showed three photos of on-bus electronic displays reading, "If Chinese nationals are discovered in the carriage, inform the dispatcher."

In this photo taken on Saturday, Feb. 22, 2020, a surveillance camera, top left, is seen as people walk down in a Moscow's Metro (subway) station in Moscow, Russia. Metro workers were instructed to stop passengers from China and ask them to fill out a questionnaire about the purpose of their visit to Russia, address of residence, health condition and whether they underwent quarantine upon arrival. (AP Photo/Alexander Zemlianichenko)

The AP was unable to independently verify the authenticity of the email and the photos. Dashkov shared screenshots of what appeared to be a genuine bus drivers' group chat in WhatsApp.

While Moscow public transit operator Mosgortrans dismissed the email as phony on its official Twitter account Wednesday, the company told the AP in a statement two days later that it does "conduct monitoring"

and "sends data to the medics when necessary."

Mosgortrans referred additional questions to the detailed statement from Moscow's mayor, who on Friday acknowledged the sharp focus on Chinese people in the city's virus-control plan.

Officials ordered everyone arriving from China to isolate themselves for two weeks, and those who skip the quarantine step will be identified through video surveillance and facial recognition technology, Sobyanin said. The systems give authorities the ability to "constantly control compliance with the protocol," he said in the statement.

In this photo taken on Saturday, Feb. 22, 2020, people go down on the escalator in a Moscow's Metro (subway) station in Moscow, Russia. Metro workers were instructed to stop passengers from China and ask them to fill out a questionnaire

about the purpose of their visit to Russia, address of residence, health condition and whether they underwent quarantine upon arrival. (AP Photo/Alexander Zemlianichenko)

The mayor's office did not respond to a request for comment on the city's containment approach and the accusation that it's discriminatory. But rights activist Popova insists the facial recognition program is unlawful whether the searches are seeking Russian or Chinese faces.

"We have a constitutional right to privacy, and citizens of (other countries) have it according to foreign and international legal norms," she said.

Temnikova from the Moscow Metro rejected accusations of racial profiling. Subway workers "mainly look at the passenger's (health) condition," she said, and approach "people who need help."

Addressing identification questions like the ones that worried the bus drivers, Temnikova said it should be "clear who could have arrived from China" because "it is obvious."

The Cossacks of Yekaterinburg - men in conservative, often pro-Kremlin groups claiming to be successors of the proud guards who policed the Russian Empire's frontiers - took fighting the virus into their own hands three weeks ago. They also have a system of sorts for deciding who needs a face mask and advice to see a medical professional.

In this file photo taken on Friday, Jan. 31, 2020, Medical workers prepare to check passengers arriving from Beijing at the Yaroslavsky railway station in Moscow, Russia. Russian authorities are going to great lengths to prevent the new coronavirus from spreading in the capital and elsewhere. In Moscow, city officials announced a slew of policies aimed at tracking down the few Chinese nationals remaining in the city, including raids on hotels and the use of facial recognition technology to target people evading quarantine. (AP Photo/Pavel Golovkin, File)

In this file photo taken on Friday, Feb. 21, 2020, Ambulance cars are parked while medics check passengers where a passenger was identified with suspected coronavirus after arriving from Kyiv at Kievsky (Kyiv's) rail station in Moscow, Russia. Russia suspended all trains to China and North Korea, shut down its land border with China and Mongolia and extended a school vacation for Chinese students until March 1. Russian authorities are going to great lengths to prevent the new coronavirus from spreading in the capital and elsewhere. (Denis Voronin, Moscow News Agency photo via AP, File)

"Mainly (we approach) people from China because it is from them that the coronavirus came. They are the main source," Igor Gorbunov, elder of the Ural Volunteer Cossack Corps, told the AP during one such patrol Friday.

"But not only them," Gorbunov continued. "There are different

nationalities, there are many people of Asian appearance, and they seem to be vulnerable to this disease, the coronavirus, because it is them who are most often affected. Europeans are not yet affected much."

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