Albania, Bulgaria record first coronavirus deaths in Balkans

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Albania and Bulgaria reported the first deaths from the novel coronavirus in the Balkans on Wednesday, as one of Europe's poorest regions braces for the spread of the virus that is wreaking havoc across the globe.

Only another 11 people are known to have been infected in Albania so far, but the country is considered vulnerable because it lies just across the Adriatic from Italy—the centre of Europe's outbreak—and has a huge diaspora living there.

After the death of a 73-year-old woman in the coastal city of Durres was reported on Wednesday, Prime Minister Edi Rama quickly announced that all bars, restaurants and clubs in Durres and in the capital Tirana would be shut.

Writing on Facebook, Rama "apologised for taking this action".

"This is not a time for holidays and entertainment, but a time of war," he wrote, saying it was necessary to "radically change the way of life" in order to protect others.

The woman who died had "several chronic illnesses", according to a statement from the Ministry of Health.

"The doctors and nurses who took care of the woman at the Durres hospital have been quarantined and are all to be tested," the health

authorities added.

In Bulgaria, a 66-year-old woman died in Sofia on Wednesday, a day after being hospitalised and diagnosed with the novel coronavirus, the country's health ministry said in a statement.

The patient had chronic heart problems and had previously undergone heart surgery and was already suffering from double pneumonia when she was admitted to hospital.

Her 74-year-old husband, who has also been diagnosed with the new coronavirus, is in critical condition.

The couple had not travelled anywhere, and it remains unclear where they contracted the virus.

Bulgaria, which has a population of seven million, has so far recorded just seven cases in total, including the couple.

Shows in concert halls, theatres and cinemas have been cancelled, while Sofia University has scrapped classes until March 15.

Influenza epidemic

Last week, Bulgaria declared a nationwide influenza epidemic, closing schools and banning planned surgeries as authorities warned hospitals were already full, potentially jeopardising preparedness for any spreading of the coronavirus.

After detecting its first infections earlier this week, Albania moved quickly to close school classes and bar mass gatherings for two weeks.

Flights and ferries to Italy, where more than 600 people have died from

the virus, have also been cancelled, as have parliamentary sessions and court trials.

So far, authorities have recorded more than 50 infections of COVID-19 in the Western Balkans, a region which also includes Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Kosovo.

But the number of those tested has also been limited to several hundred or fewer in each country.

As the contagion sweeps Europe, Balkan governments have issued a slew of new restrictions, including a move by Serbia to temporarily ban entry of foreign nationals coming from zones in the hardest-hit countries like Italy, China, South Korea and Iran.

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