Solidarity: Foreign hospitals help French virus hotspot cope

March 24 2020, by Thomas Adamson and Jean-Francois Badias

A victim of the Covid-19 virus is evacuated from the Mulhouse civil hospital, eastern France, Monday March 23, 2020. The Grand Est region is now the epicenter of the outbreak in France, which has buried the third most virus victims in Europe, after Italy and Spain. For most people, the new coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms. For some it can cause more severe illness. (AP Photo/Jean-Francois Badias)

The eastern French border city of Mulhouse was fought over by France and Germany across two centuries, but the horrors of the new coronavirus cluster tearing through this community of 110,000 is inspiring unusual solidarity.

While many countries have shut their borders to stem the march of the pandemic—even some nations within the borderless European Union are instituting ID checks—three German states have opened their hospitals to patients from eastern France. Hospitals in bordering Switzerland have done the same.

The Grand Est region is now the epicenter of the outbreak in France, which has buried the third most virus victims in Europe, after Italy and Spain. The crisis there can be traced largely to a dayslong evangelical church gathering in Mulhouse attended by hundreds of people at the end of February.

In a sign of the devastating toll, the local newspaper in Mulhouse has had to add extra obituary pages as the deaths from the coronavirus increase—as has been done in some areas of Italy. In France, only the area around Paris had confirmed more cases than Grand Est as of Sunday, but the capital region has a population more than twice the size.

"Every day we have eight to 12 people who arrive. We don't know what to do," said Dr. Patrick Vogt, a general practitioner at the hospital in Mulhouse who recalled a shift just two weeks ago answering the city's emergency hotline when call after call came in for respiratory problems.

French soldiers discuss inside the military field hospital built in Mulhouse, eastern France, Monday March 23, 2020. The Grand Est region is now the epicenter of the outbreak in France, which has buried the third most virus victims in Europe, after Italy and Spain. For most people, the new coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms. For some it can cause more severe illness. (AP Photo/Jean-Francois Badias)

In Germany, the states of Saarland, Rhineland-Palatinate and Baden-Wuerttemberg have offered spare hospitals beds to treat French patients.

The spokesman of Baden-Wuerttemberg state's health ministry said the state would "naturally try to help our French neighbors," and authorities have asked all hospitals with free capacity to take in French patients requiring ventilators.

While Germany has many more confirmed virus cases than France, it has a much smaller number of deaths: 123, according to data from Johns Hopkins University, compared to France's 860.

Today's scenes in and around Mulhouse are sadly reminiscent of the bloodiest moments in the border region's turbulent history. It was the stomping ground for armies in the 19th-century Franco-Prussian war and a site of intense battles during the 20th century's two world wars, which included bitter territorial disputes over the Alsace region, now part of what's called the Grand Est. The city was the site of France's World War I opening attack against Germany in 1914's Battle of Mulhouse, while bloody battles and burning villages tore it apart again during World War II as German and U.S. forces fought each other.

Civil medical staff walk past the military field hospital built in Mulhouse, eastern

France, Monday March 23, 2020. The Grand Est region is now the epicenter of the outbreak in France, which has buried the third most virus victims in Europe, after Italy and Spain. For most people, the new coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms. For some it can cause more severe illness. (AP Photo/Jean-Francois Badias)

Regional health officials say that Grand Est is approximately one week ahead of the rest of France in terms of infection rates: As of Monday, according to French government data, the region had recorded nearly 4,300 cases in an area with around 5.5 million people. In contrast, the area around France's capital of Paris, home to more than 12 million, had around 6,200 confirmed virus infections.

The analysis serves as a warning for France, where the population of 67 million people already is locked down, that the worst could be yet to come.

In addition to the help offered from abroad, Mulhouse has drawn the focus of French President Emmanuel Macron, who ordered a field hospital built to help tend to the sick.

Dozens of soldiers put up the temporary medical facility, which has equipment designed to make surgery possible in combat zones retrofitted to treat people with COVID-19, the illness caused by the virus.

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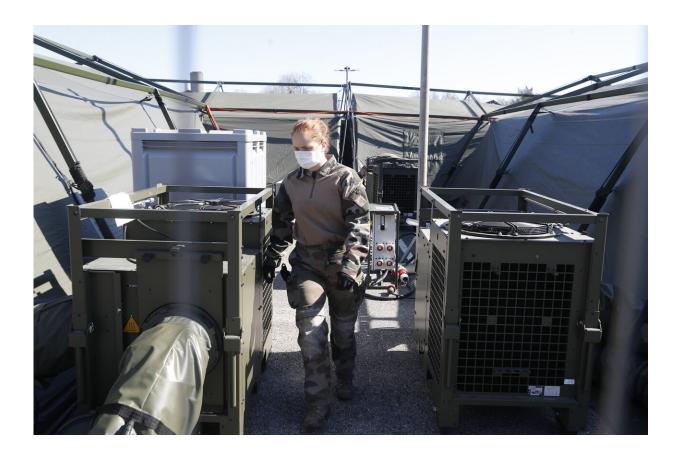
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The military field hospital built in Mulhouse, eastern France, is pictured Monday March 23, 2020. The Grand Est region is now the epicenter of the outbreak in France, which has buried the third most virus victims in Europe, after Italy and Spain. For most people, the new coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms. For some it can cause more severe illness. (AP Photo/Jean-Francois Badias)

A soldier walks by equipments ar the Mulhouse military makeshift hospital build in Mulhouse, eastern France, Monday March 23, 2020. The Grand Est region is now the epicenter of the outbreak in France, which has buried the third most virus victims in Europe, after Italy and Spain. For most people, the new coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms. For some it can cause more severe illness. (AP Photo/Jean-Francois Badias)

A soldier stands inside the military field hospital built in Mulhouse, eastern France, Monday March 23, 2020. The Grand Est region is now the epicenter of the outbreak in France, which has buried the third most virus victims in Europe, after Italy and Spain. For most people, the new coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms. For some it can cause more severe illness. (AP Photo/Jean-Francois Badias)

A soldier guards the Mulhouse military makeshift hospital build in Mulhouse, eastern France, Monday March 23, 2020. The Grand Est region is now the epicenter of the outbreak in France, which has buried the third most virus victims in Europe, after Italy and Spain. For most people, the new coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms. For some it can cause more severe illness. (AP Photo/Jean-Francois Badias)

Doctors and medical staffs are invited by soldiers to visit military makeshift hospital built in Mulhouse, eastern France, Monday March 23, 2020. The Grand Est region is now the epicenter of the outbreak in France, which has buried the third most virus victims in Europe, after Italy and Spain. For most people, the new coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms. For some it can cause more severe illness. (AP Photo/Jean-Francois Badias)

A soldier opens the gate to a worker at the military field hospital built in Mulhouse, eastern France, Monday March 23, 2020. The Grand Est region is now the epicenter of the outbreak in France, which has buried the third most virus victims in Europe, after Italy and Spain. For most people, the new coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms. For some it can cause more severe illness. (AP Photo/Jean-Francois Badias)

Authorities readied the five tents, each with six beds, to start taking patients this week. About 100 military health personnel—anesthetists, nurses and nursing assistants—were assigned to operate the field hospital.

In an unprecedented move during peacetime, the French army has also started evacuating critical coronavirus patients from the country's east.

On Tuesday, France's defense minister announced another military airlift of patients hospitalized in Mulhouse. The first of several took place last week.

"The epidemic is in full swing. The virus continues to spread. The patients keeping coming in serious condition," said Vogt, the doctor in Mulhouse. "So far, there are no signs of hope."