

Spain seeks NATO help as virus death toll touches 2,700

March 24 2020

Spain's armed forces on Tuesday asked NATO for humanitarian assistance to fight the novel coronavirus as the national death toll touched 2,700 and infections soared towards 40,000.

With the pandemic spreading across the world, Spain has been one of the worst-hit countries, logging the third highest number of deaths with the latest toll standing at 2,696 after another 514 people died over the past 24 hours.

Despite an unprecedented lockdown imposed on March 14, both deaths and infections have continued to mount, with the Spanish army called in to join efforts to curb its spread.

With authorities stepping up testing, the number of people diagnosed with COVID-19 rose by nearly 20 percent to 39,673, the health ministry said.

Health authorities said it would soon become clear whether the lockdown was having the desired effect.

"This is a very hard week because we're in the first stages of overcoming the virus, a phase in which we are approaching the peak of the epidemic," Health Minister Salvador Illa told a televised news conference.

Like many other countries, Spain has been struggling with a lack of

medical supplies for testing, treatment and the protection of frontline workers.

In a statement, NATO said Spain's military had asked for "international assistance", seeking medical supplies to help curb the spread of the virus both in the military and in the civilian population.

The request specified 450,000 respirators, 500,000 rapid testing kits, 500 ventilators and 1.5 million surgical masks.

'War economy'

The government has said it is working on plans to produce in Spain the equipment needed to battle coronavirus.

"We are starting to talk about a war industry, a war economy and it is essential," Industry Minister Maria Reyes Maroto told a news conference.

With the numbers still spiralling, the government of Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez on Tuesday sought parliamentary approval to extend the state of emergency for an extra two weeks, until April 11—the day before Easter—in a bid to slow the spread of the virus.

"We are aware of just how hard it is to prolong this situation, but it is absolutely imperative that we keep fighting the virus in order to win this battle," government spokeswoman Maria Jesus Montero told the news conference.

Spain, she said, was in "the decisive phase in responding to the crisis, a crisis which was testing Spanish society in the most unimaginable way".

The surge in numbers has brought the medical system to the brink of

collapse, with some 5,400 healthcare workers testing positive for the virus, around 12 percent of the total.

The Madrid region has suffered the brunt of the epidemic with 12,352 infections—just under a third of the total—and 1,535 deaths, or 57 percent of the national figure.

Easter and beyond?

Speaking to TVE public television, the Madrid region's top health official, Enrique Ruiz Escudero, said the crisis was "unprecedented in the history of Spain's national health service", suggesting it was likely that the lockdown would extend beyond Easter, which this year falls on April 12.

With the city's funeral services overwhelmed, Madrid officials have commandeered the Palacio de Hielo ice skating rink to serve as a temporary morgue.

"We don't have the logistical capacity to carry out all the burials and cremations at the rate at which people are dying," Madrid's mayor Jose Luis Martinez-Almeida told TVE public television.

The Spanish capital has also transformed part of a giant exhibition centre into a field hospital with 1,500 beds which could be expanded take in up to 5,500 patients.

Police on Tuesday caught three "irresponsible" coronavirus patients who left hospital without authorisation and risked spreading the disease to others, Interior Minister Fernando Grande-Marlaska said.

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