

Swiss army says preparing to deploy to assist virus fight

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Switzerland's armed forces said Saturday that the army is prepared to deploy to help in the battle against the COVID-19 pandemic, which has infected more than 1,000 people in the country.

The army will as of Monday deploy one of its four hospital battalions, army chief Thomas Süssli said in a tweet overnight.

The battalion will carry out a "special service towards the security and protection of us all," he wrote.

While he did not clarify the specific service to be provided, he pointed out that more than 90 percent of the personnel in Switzerland's hospital battalions "work in other professions, but have civilian-recognised, military-acquired basic care training."

Army spokesman Daniel Reist told AFP that the battalion, made up of between 500 and 600 people, will be prepared to support work at hospitals across the country if requested, especially taking on logistical tasks.

"There has not yet been a request," he said.

The army, which in Switzerland is organised as a militia, with conscripts carrying out a short initial training and then being called back in for several weeks of training each year, also counts doctors and specialists in its ranks, but they have been asked to remain in their civilian positions.

The army has already deployed 23 people to support two hospitals in Switzerland's southern Ticino region, which borders hard-hit Italy, Reist said.

The Swiss government meanwhile warned Saturday that cybercriminals had begun sending out emails purportedly from the country's health ministry, playing on people's anxiety over the pandemic to try to infect their computers with malware.

The news came after Switzerland on Friday announced a raft of measures to halt the spread of the coronavirus, including school closures across the country and tighter border controls, and said it would provide \$10 billion to help businesses and workers get through the crisis.

Ski resorts in the wealthy Alpine nation have also closed.

According to the latest official count, 1,355 people have been infected in the small Alpine country and 11 have died from the virus.

The overall death toll from the new virus, which first emerged in China in December, has jumped to more than 5,400 across the world, including nearly 1,500 in Europe, with total infections topping 140,000 internationally, according to an AFP tally based on official sources.

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