Russia records more than 10,000 new virus cases

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Russia reported more than 10,000 new coronavirus cases Wednesday, continuing a grim trend that has seen the country register the world's second-highest number of infections.

Health officials reported 10,028 new cases over the last 24 hours, bringing Russia's total number of infections to 242,271.

Health Minister Mikhail Murashko told parliament more than 100,000 patients are now hospitalised with confirmed or suspected coronavirus, a jump from the figure of 80,000 he gave on Friday.

Nearly 1,500 patients are currently on ventilators, the minister said.

An unofficial list of deaths among medics started by a group of Russian doctors listed 174 names as of Wednesday, including some from neighbouring Belarus.

Some medical workers have complained of shortages of protective gear and said medics are dying at a higher rate in Russia than elsewhere.

Murashko acknowledged ongoing "disruptions" in supplies of personal protective equipment for medics, while he said those working in "red zones" with infected patients now have enough.

Russia's healthcare regulator on Wednesday ordered a halt to the use of ventilators believed to have caused two fires at coronavirus hospitals in Moscow and Saint Petersburg that left six people dead.

The blazes have been linked to domestically-produced Aventa-M breathing machines which were also part of a Russian shipment to the United States on April 1.

A spokesman for the US Federal Emergency Management Agency said the equipment had been sent to hospitals in US states New York and New Jersey but had not been used.

"Out of an abundance of caution, the states are returning the ventilators to FEMA" and any future use will be decided after the Russian probe concludes, the spokesman added.

The Kremlin this week began easing a national lockdown to slow the spread of the virus, despite a steady rise in numbers that on Tuesday brought Russia to second place in a global tally of infections, behind only the United States.

A majority of Russia's new cases were registered in the capital, a government virus tally said, where Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin has extended a lockdown until the end of May.

Senior figures infected

Prominent lawmaker Oxana Pushkina said she tested positive for the coronavirus, becoming the latest high-profile political figure to get infected.

She said she had no symptoms and added she hoped to get back to work soon.

President Vladimir Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov and Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin earlier tested positive and were hospitalised.

Peskov's wife, Olympic ice dancer Tatiana Navka, who has also tested positive, wrote on Instagram that she was already recovering but "it's a bit more complicated for my husband".

Despite the steady rise in new cases, Russia's reported mortality rate is significantly lower compared to other European countries hit hard by the pandemic, with 96 new deaths and a total of 2,212 dead from the coronavirus as of Wednesday.

Authorities say the low mortality rate is because Russia was able to learn lessons from the experiences of western Europe, moving quickly to isolate travellers and people at risk, convert hospitals for virus patients

and launch a vast campaign to test and quarantine those infected.

Health Minister Murashko said low fatalities were "thanks to our hero medics".

Authorities on Monday said they had carried out nearly six million tests.

But critics have cast doubt on the figures, accusing the authorities of under-counting by blaming virus-related deaths on other causes.

Murashko said that Russia was working on developing vaccines and clinical tests are planned to start in June.

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