

Kazakhstan imposes 'second wave' of restrictions as coronavirus surges

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Kazakhstan on Sunday imposed a second round of nationwide restrictions to counter a huge surge in coronavirus cases since the previous lockdown, which has overwhelmed the oil-rich country's

healthcare system.

Shopping centres, gyms, swimming pools, hairdressers and beauty salons have all closed down for the next two weeks, a measure that authorities may choose to extend.

An AFP correspondent saw long queues outside pharmacies in the country's largest city Almaty, where demand for medicines such as paracetamol has far outstripped supply.

Yevgeny Yermin was waiting to buy medicines for his 76-year-old mother, who has [coronavirus](#) symptoms.

He said that he had not taken the virus seriously until it hit his own family.

"A week ago we lost our grandfather (to the coronavirus). We thought it was all some sort of a joke. Turns out it isn't a joke at all," Yermin told AFP.

Kazakhstan imposed a strict lockdown in late March that saw important sectors of the economy grind to a halt and prevented most travel.

But it was one of the first Central Asian countries to lift restrictions in late May, when it had less than 9,000 confirmed cases.

Since then however, coronavirus cases have risen more than five-fold, reaching over 47,000 with 188 fatalities.

Stadium converted to field hospital

The new restrictions are notably less stringent—travel between most cities remains possible and citizens can fly in and out of the country.

Darya, a 17-year-old Almaty resident, told AFP she felt the second lockdown was not strict enough.

"In parks, people are walking around without masks and gathering in big crowds," she said, adding that several of her friends were currently ill with the virus.

The growth in cases is putting acute strain on hospitals, with several hospital chiefs reporting that they are full or nearing capacity.

President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev earlier this week ordered a 50-percent expansion in the number of hospital beds.

Almaty's Halyk Arena, a sports stadium that usually stages [ice hockey](#) and volleyball matches, is being converted into a temporary [hospital](#) with the capacity to receive up to 1,000 coronavirus patients in the coming weeks.

The arena is already being used as coronavirus testing point.

Aliya Baygaliyeva, the doctor in charge, told AFP that the centre had a capacity of up to 800 tests per day, but until recently had been hampered by a two-week delay in supplies of reagents from South Korea.

Last month only 70 to 80 people per day came to take tests, but now there was far more demand, she said.

"(The virus) has gathered strength. We are seeing a lot more people here now."

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