Russia hits 2 mn virus cases as deaths reach record high

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Russia's total coronavirus caseload surpassed two million on Thursday as officials registered record increases in new infections and virus-related deaths.

The country has witnessed a surge in cases over recent weeks but authorities have stopped short of reintroducing stringent lockdown measures like several European countries.

Health officials reported 23,610 new infections Thursday and 463 virus-related deaths, both record highs since the beginning of Russia's outbreak.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov described the outbreak as "very worrying" and said it was President Vladimir Putin's "top priority".

Total infections stood at 2.02 million—the fifth-highest caseload in the world—while deaths reached 34,850 in the country of 145 million.

Russia has reported a much lower fatality rate compared with other badly hit countries, raising concerns that authorities are playing down the severity of the pandemic.

The federal statistics service published data this month that showed excess deaths of more than 117,000 year-on-year between March and September, indicating that virus fatalities could be much higher.

Putin voiced concern on Wednesday over the country's "alarming" fatality rate.

He acknowledged that some regions were experiencing medicine shortfalls and extended waiting times for ambulances but said that the authorities have the situation under control.

Health Minister Mikhail Murashko said Monday that 84 percent of the country's hospital beds allocated for coronavirus patients were occupied.

Also on Monday, Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin criticised heads of

regions beyond Moscow, which have less funding than the capital, for not reintroducing restrictions.

Russia hopes to avoid a second nationwide lockdown by accelerating the production of vaccines.

The country has so far registered two, and on Wednesday Putin said they would soon be made widely available.

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