

Cured patients cheered at Spain's largest COVID-19 field hospital

April 4 2020

When staff take a break to applaud at a sprawling field hospital set up at Madrid's conference centre to treat people with coronavirus, it means a patient has been discharged.

Located just a short drive from Madrid's airport, the Ifema conference centre normally hosts car shows, art fairs and concerts.

But in just two weeks soldiers converted it into Spain's largest field [hospital](#) to treat victims of the pandemic, which has claimed nearly 11,000 lives in the country, nearly 5,000 of them in the Madrid region.

The facility opened on March 21 and it currently houses just over 1,000 patients, who are spread out in neat rows of white beds separated two metres (six feet) apart by removable partitions.

A nurse wearing a [face mask](#) comes to an abrupt stop at a yellow line on the floor marking the start of the area of the hospital deemed "dirty" or contaminated because it's where the infected patients are treated.

Staff must wear full protective gear to enter this area.

In one unit with 12 beds separated by removable partitions, one patient is asleep, another plays with his [mobile phone](#) while a third peels an orange.

Three patients wearing face masks wait while sitting on chairs. They

have been declared cured. Applause rings out when they get up to leave.

"It's a good day for us because we are discharging more and more patients," the general coordinator of the field hospital, Fernando Prados, told AFP.

Over 2,000 patients have passed through the facility since it opened, and about 900 were discharged after they were cured, he added. Eight patients have died.

Officials originally planned to set up 5,500 beds at the conference centre but they have stopped "for the moment" at 1,500 because hospitals in Madrid are slowly seeing a drop in the number of people seeking care, he added.

'My father's age'

Every day Maria Sanchez Fernandez, a 29-year-old nurse from health centre who volunteered to work at the field hospital, carefully disinfects the screen of her plastic face shield.

"At the beginning they gave use four pairs of gloves, now they say two are enough. I wear three pairs, it's my health after all," she said.

Maria Luisa Prados Jimenez, a doctor who is also aged 29, is part of a team of young interns who have been sent to work here in addition to regular shifts at local hospitals and health centres.

The facility was designed to treat light cases but on Thursday she said a 63-year-old man without any major chronic conditions "suddenly worsened" and had to be sent to an intensive care unit where he is now in serious condition.

The sixties "seems young to me, that is my father's age," added Jimenez, the daughter of a doctor from the southern region of Andalusia.

'Tenderness and humanity'

The [field hospital](#) "was a bit chaotic and disorganised" when it opened but "it has improved greatly since Monday", Jimenez said.

Doctors can now order lung X-rays and a small intensive care unit opened on the ground on Thursday, she said.

At a huge warehouse nearby, soldiers in combat gear are busy sorting healthcare material, some of it arrived from China.

At the exit of the conference centre, Eduardo Lopez, a 59-year-old builder, breathes a sigh of relief. He has just been discharged and is rushing to get a taxi to go home.

His voice shaken with emotion, he said he gave a "10/10" rating to the staff who cared for him "with tenderness and a great dose of humanity".

But he said he will always remember "the suffering and uncertainty generated by the disease".

"It greatly affects you psychologically to know that people are dying, that it's a reality and not a series you watch on TV," he added.

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