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Bulgaria, Moldova Report First Coronavirus Cases

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Bulgaria and Moldova have confirmed the first cases of the coronavirus in those countries.

Bulgarian health officials have confirmed a total of four cases of the coronavirus even as the country battles to contain an outbreak of influenza.

Officials said on March 8 that two men from the northern city of Pleven and two women in the central city of Gabrovo have tested positive.

The government was expected to hold an emergency meeting later in the day to discuss measures to contain the outbreak.

Bulgaria has already introduced temperature screening at all airports and border crossings in a bid to prevent the spread of the disease.

After the first two cases were announced earlier in the day, chief state health inspector Angel Kunchev said the patients apparently had not traveled anywhere or come into contact with anyone who had returned from a country with a coronavirus outbreak.

Todor Kantardzhiev, director of the National Center of Infectious and Parasitic Diseases, said the 27-year-old man and the 75-year-old woman were tested for the infection as a preventive measure after being hospitalized several days ago with severe respiratory problems.

Health officials said they have identified and begun testing those who had been in contact with the two, about 40 people in total.

Bulgaria is already battling an influenza epidemic, with hospitals full of flu patients.

The government has declared a nationwide influenza epidemic and closed all schools from March 6-11. Hospitals were ordered to postpone elective surgeries and ban patient visits.

"The health system is already overburdened even before a single case of coronavirus has been detected," Kunchev was quoted as saying on March 6.

Almost 5,000 cases of type B flu were reported during the last week of February.

Authorities in Moldova, meanwhile, have reported that country's first confirmed case of coronavirus.

The Health Ministry said late on March 7 that a 48-year-old woman tested positive in Chisinau after being hospitalized upon arriving from Italy.

Italy is one of the countries hardest hit by the epidemic.

"The person was taken from the airport…with bilateral pneumonia, acute respiratory failure, fever, cough, and general weakness," the ministry's statement said.

Health, Labor, and Social Services Minister Viorica Dumbraveanu said on March 8 that the woman fell ill in Italy on February 28 and had been hospitalized there.

"However, she irresponsibly left the hospital and got on a plane and came back home," Dumbraveanu said during a meeting of a special commission set up to deal with the coronavirus situation.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the novel coronavirus has been identified in 103 countries and territories around the world. More than 106,000 infection cases have been identified globally and about 3,600 people have died.

With reporting by RFE/RL's Bulgarian Service, Reuters, Interfax, AFP, TASS, and The Sofia Globe

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