COVID-19: First Deaths In Afghanistan, Kosovo, Romania, North Macedonia

RFE/RL

16-20 minutes

The global coronavirus pandemic has infected more than 339,000 people and killed nearly 15,000 worldwide, causing mass disruptions as governments continue to try to slow the spread of the new respiratory illness.

Here's a roundup of developments in RFE/RL's broadcast countries.

Afghanistan

Afghanistan's Health Ministry says a 40-year old man has died from coronavirus, becoming the country's first fatality from the disease.

Afghanistan has 34 confirmed cases of the virus.

Iran

Health officials say Iran's death toll from coronavirus has reached 1,685, as the country continues to struggle with mounting cases and an overloaded health-care system.

The Health Ministry said on March 22 that another 129 people had died over the past 24 hours. The ministry also said the country's overall tally of confirmed cases of COVID-19 was 21,638.

Iran has been one of the worst-hit countries outside of China and Italy.

With the country reeling from the outbreak, officials have recommended Iranians stay home during the Norouz holiday, which began on March 20 and is one of the biggest holidays of the year for Iranians.

Officials have worried that efforts to slow the spread of COVID-19 will be hampered as people travel for the holiday to see friends and relatives.

The government has closed schools at all levels, banned sports and cultural events, and curtailed religious activities.

Many Iranians have also been angered by the temporary closure of Shi'ite sites, prompting some crowds to storm into the courtyards of two major shrines.

In a televised speech to mark Norouz, Iran's supreme leader rejected an offer from the United States for assistance in fighting coronavirus.

"We have many enemies, but the worst is the U.S.... and now they want to help us," Khamenei said.

He said the United States would be better off helping its own people, with hundreds of American deaths being linked to the virus after a spike in cases over the last week.

Khamenei also cited an unfounded conspiracy theory that the virus could be manmade by the United States.

"Possibly your [offered] medicine is a way to spread the virus more," he said.

Georgia

Two southern Georgian regions will lock down on March 23 as part of an effort to prevent the spread of coronavirus, the country's prime minister said the previous day.

Giorgi Gakharia said at an emergency news briefing that the Marneuli and Bolnisi regions, both of which border Azerbaijan, would be closed off for entry and exit.

The regions would be supplied with food and medicine, and only grocery stores and pharmacies are to remain open as well.

Critical infrastructure and services would be available as well.

The decision was made after a woman who had contact with at least 90 people after attending a relative's death anniversary dinner was diagnosed with the COVID-19 respiratory illness.

At this point, doctors were able to identify at least 85 people with whom the infected woman had contact.

The South Caucasus country of 3.7 million had 54 cases of coronavirus as of March 22, with no deaths.

Georgia's parliament over the weekend approved a presidential decree that imposes a one-month nationwide state of emergency in an attempt to slow the spread of the coronavirus.

President Salome Zurabishvili on March 21 sent the decree to parliament as the number of cases in the former Soviet republic rose to 49. The parliament passed it later that evening.

The president called on citizens to follow the recommendations of the World Health Organization and the Georgian Health Ministry in order to slow the spread of the virus and avoid a "new level" of restrictions.

Kosovo

Local authorities say an 82-year-old man has died from coronavirus, Kosovo's first death from the disease.

The Public Health Institute said in a statement on March 22 that the man, who died in a hospital, had underlying health issues, including chronic cardiac and pulmonary problems.

Officials said the tally of confirmed infections in the country stood at 31 as of March 22.

The death comes as Kosovars grow increasingly impatient with the government, which has struggled to mount a coherent response to the outbreak.

Prime Minister Albin Kurti's shaky coalition government, which took four months to assemble after October elections, is on the verge of collapse because of disagreements over coronavirus measures.

Angry residents of the capital, Pristina, banged pots and pans from their balconies on March 19 to protest the government's actions.

Most of those infected in Kosovo have come from Italy or are related to someone who returned from a European Union member state.

Authorities have closed all schools, borders, bars, and restaurants to curb the spread of the virus. Only supermarkets and pharmacies remain open.

Romania

Romanian authorities report that two people have died from the coronavirus, the first such deaths for the country.

The government's Strategic Communications Group said on March 22 that the number of confirmed cases in the country had risen sharply and now stands at 433, up from 322 just a day earlier.

Officials said the first victim was a 67-year-old man who had been suffering from terminal cancer and who died after having been infected on March 18.

The man had returned to Romania 12 days earlier, on March 6, from France, before restrictions on international travel had been imposed. The government did not say when he died or how he had become infected, saying only that he was being treated at a hospital in the southern city of Craiova.

A total of 23 medical workers who were in contact with the man have been tested for the coronavirus. Of the 18 tests that have been returned so far, all were negative, officials said.

The second victim was a 74-year-old who had been diagnosed just the day before and was already being treated for kidney problems. Officials said that person died in a medical facility in the capital, Bucharest.

The government declared a state of emergency on March 16 and on March 21 announced a nighttime curfew.

The curfew will restrict the movement of people from 10 p.m. to 6 a.m. and go into effect on March 23. It is expected to last through the 30-day state of emergency declared on March 16.

Those exempted include people going to work and those requiring medical assistance.

Interior Minister Marcel Vela and other officials said the measures will also prohibit gatherings of more than three persons outside the home and will mandate the closing of shopping malls and dental clinics. Restaurants and other gathering places were ordered closed earlier in the week.

During the night curfew hours, the only people allowed to move about are medical professionals, those engaging in work activities, shopping for necessary items, and caring for children or the elderly or people walking their pets.

"Everything we have decided to implement is meant to limit the risks to the population," Vela said.

He also warned those who are price-gouging or taking other actions to profit from the crisis.

"We have taken strong actions against those who have tried to speculate on the situation in order to get rich. It's not just illegal -- it's also cynical," he said.

Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan has 60 confirmed coronavirus cases as of the morning of March 23, following another confirmed infection the previous evening.

The Health Ministry says there are 31 registered cases in the capital, Nur-Sultan, 25 in the largest city, Almaty, and two in the Karaganda and one each in the Almaty and Aktobe regions.

Almaty and Nur-Sultan have been on lockdown since March 19

and a state of emergency was announced earlier this month.

Kazakhstan had already announced the cancelation of Norouz holiday celebrations and a military parade devoted to the 75th anniversary of the victory over Nazi Germany.

The oil-rich Central Asian country recorded its first cases of COVID-19 on March 13 after three patients tested positive upon returning from separate trips to Germany and Italy.

Kazakhstan shares a 1,800-kilometer border with China where the respiratory illness emerged late last year.

The outbreak has since grown to become a global pandemic, infecting more than 300,000 worldwide and leading to over 14,000 deaths.

Russia

Russia has widened its ban on international flights as the number of registered coronavirus cases in the country reached 367.

As of March 23, Russian airlines will only service foreign capitals or large cities like New York and only from Moscow airports, state agency Rosavia said.

Russia will continue to permit charter flights exclusively for the evacuation of citizens stuck overseas, it said.

Nearly 20,000 Russian citizens have been evacuated from countries suffering from a high number of coronavirus cases.

The flight-ban announcement comes as Russia registered another 61 cases of the coronavirus, bringing the country's total to 367.

However, Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin said the Russian

capital will not close its metro, a step three Ukrainian cities, including Kyiv, took where subways operate. The Moscow metro transports several million people a day to work and its closure would have severe consequences for the city's economy.

The Culture Ministry has recommended that as of March 23 all movie theaters be closed. Earlier in the month, the ministry closed all theaters, philharmonics, circuses, and movie theaters that belong to it.

Russia, the world's ninth-most populous country, has registered relatively few cases of COVID-19 on a per capita basis compared to its European neighbors, raising questions about the accuracy of the tally. Italy has more than 47,000 while Spain has more than 25,000.

Moscow, Europe's largest city with about 12 million inhabitants, has registered just 137 cases of COVID-19. New York City, which has just over 8 million people, has registered more than 8,000 cases.

Russia also shares one of the world's longest borders with China, where the new coronavirus originated. China has registered more than 81,000 cases.

Russian news agency RBK reported last week that the country had experienced a spike in the number of pneumonia cases this year.

While the majority of people who contract COVID-19 suffer only mild symptoms resembling the common cold, severe cases can develop into pneumonia.

Ukraine

Ukraine saw the number confirmed coronavirus cases rise to 73 as the capital, Kyiv, on March 23 is closing all public transportation for noncritical personnel.

The Health Ministry's Center for Public Health said that as of 10:50 p.m. local time on March 22, there were 26 new cases of the respiratory illness known as COVID-19 in nine regions and the city of Kyiv.

The ministry says it is further monitoring more than 360 suspected cases, including over 239 patients in hospitals.

Health Minister Illya Yemets said on March 22 that he supports declaring a nationwide state of emergency.

"I have been talking about this since the first day of my work in the government. It had to be done from the beginning. If it were to succeed, there would be no such [virus] spread, which is now developing geometrically," Yemets told 112 TV in an interview.

Meanwhile, one of several planned medical supply flights from China has arrived in Kyiv, the Ukrainian presidential office said on March 23.

It brought an unspecified number of polymerase chain reaction (PCR) tests as well as 250,000 express tests including different kind of protective medical masks, disinfectants, and "artificial ventilation apparatus and other means necessary to combat the spread of COVID-19," President Volodymyr Zelenskiy's office said.

Each regional laboratory on March 23 will receive the PCR tests.

The procurement was made with the assistance of large Ukrainian business owners.

"This is only the first batch of medicinal cargo from China. Several

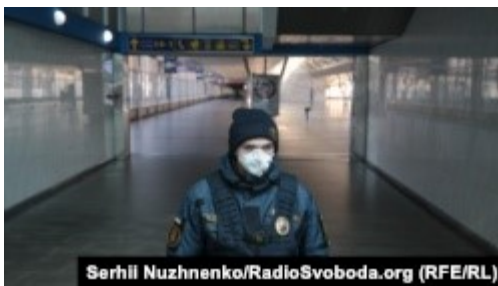more flights are planned for this week," the presidential office said.

There are three deaths related to the virus as schools have remained closed nationwide. Eateries, bars, gyms, theaters, and shopping malls, as well as subways operating in three cities, have been also been kept closed.

Interior Minister Arsen Avakov the previous day called for a nationwide quarantine to slow the spread of coronavirus as Ukraine's capital and largest city, Kyiv, said it would shut all public transportation for noncritical personnel.

Avakov, one of the most powerful officials in Ukraine, said the measures already put in place to fight the spread will be "significantly toughened" in the coming days. He said only "critical" industries should remain open and everyone else sent home.

"A total, full quarantine is my position, which I want to ask of each of you. And I will insist on it, according to the power of my position," Avakov said in a Facebook post on March 21.

Kyiv Mayor Vitaliy Klitschko said in a March 21 video post that only people whose work is vital to the city will be allowed to use public transport. The new measure goes into effect on March 23, he said.

Serhii Nuzhnenko/RadioSvoboda.org (RFE/RL)

The main railway station in Kyiv is closed for quarantine.

Bulgaria

Bulgaria's president has vetoed new nationwide restrictions

passed by parliament as part of the state of emergency imposed to fight the spread of coronavirus.

Rumen Radev said on March 22 that he opposed the new proposals, calling them "extremely restrictive" and a threat to civil liberties in the country.

""The lack of adequate measures will bring about a situation where hunger will prevail over fear and the consequences will be destructive," he said in a statement that was released announcing his veto.

Parliament passed the proposed measures on March 20 after an initial proposal from the cabinet a week before.

Among the proposed measures that Radev said he opposed were allowing authorities to track mobile-phone users, to ensure people infected with the coronavirus are properly observing quarantine.

The measures also call for giving increased public-safety duties to military units, and for freezing prices for some goods at a three-month average, in an effort to prevent price gouging.

As of March 22, Bulgaria has confirmed 171 cases of people infected with the virus. Three people have died since March 8, when the first death was announced.

Three people have also recovered.

North Macedonia

In neighboring North Macedonia, a 57-year-old woman has become the country's first coronavirus fatality.

The woman had caught the infection during a trip to Italy, which has the most cases in Europe. Her son has been infected, too, and

is hospitalized in stable condition, health officials said on March 22.

North Macedonia had 114 registered cases of the novel coronavirus as of March 22, officials said.

On March 21, the government said it had decided to impose a curfew from 9 p.m. to 6 a.m. beginning on March 22, the first time such a step has been taken since the country's independence in 1991.

In an emergency address, North Macedonia's prime minister, Oliver Spasovski, said that "we have decided to introduce the most radical measures in order to protect the health of citizens."

"Starting [on March 22], we will restrict the movement of all citizens. It is forbidden for the population to move outside between 9 p.m. and 6 a.m. every day. There is no compromise when it comes to the health of citizens," Spasovski warned.

The prohibitions exclude persons who need medical assistance or whose lives are endangered. Those who need dialysis are allowed to arrive for treatment with up to two other people.

Employees in health-care facilities are also excluded from the curfew, as are members of the Ministry of Interior, the army, fire crews, and workers in municipal hygiene.

Serbia

President Aleksandar Vucic said the government will extend a curfew that is already in effect by three hours as Serbia attempts to curtail the spread of the coronavirus, making it a 12-hour ban from 5 p.m. to 5 a.m.

He said the steps were necessary "for our survival," and he threatened a 24-hour curfew if residents continued to ignore orders to remain indoors.

Serbia has registered 171 cases of the coronavirus and one death as of late on March 21.

In neighboring Bosnia-Herzegovina, the governments of the two entities on March 21 imposed nighttime restrictions on people outside their homes, with the Muslim-Croat federation ordering a 6-p.m.-to-5-a.m. curfew, and Republika Srpska restricting people to their homes from 8 p.m. to 5 a.m.

Uzbekistan

Uzbek officials have ordered all companies in the capital, Tashkent, to switch to remote working.

They also made protective masks mandatory in all major cities in order to prevent the spread of coronavirus.

Officials on March 22 said citizens not wearing masks in public in major cities would be fined $22 for the first offense and $67 for repeat offenses.

Uzbekistan, which has a population of 34 million, has just 43 confirmed cases, nearly all in Tashkent.

Pakistan

Sindh, the hardest-hit province in Pakistan, has announced a 15-day lockdown starting March 23.

Sindh has nearly half of the country's 687 registered cases.

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province, meanwhile, issued orders banning

intercity transport starting from March 24.

With reporting by RFE/RL's Balkan, Bulgarian, Romanian, and Ukrainian services and Radio Mashaal, Reuters, AP, RIA Novosti, and TASS