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Argentina, Chile confirm first coronavirus cases

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Argentina and Chile both said on Tuesday they had confirmed their first case of the novel coronavirus in patients who recently returned from travels.

A 43-year-old infected Argentine man had returned from Italy on March 1, while a 33-year-old Chilean man had spent a month in southeast Asia.

Health Minister Gines Gonzalez Garcia said the Argentine patient has been in isolation since presenting himself to a private health clinic in Buenos Aires the day he returned.

"We've identified a first case. It's a patient who came from Italy" but had also traveled around other parts of Europe, said Gonzalez Garcia.

The minister, who added that "fortunately the case is not complicated," said Argentina was prepared to tackle the virus.

"There are countries that have managed to prevent the spread and other countries that haven't," said Gonzalez Garcia.

"I have every hope and belief that this will be contained."

Chile's Health Minister Jaime Manalich said the 33-year-old patient had been taken to a hospital in the city of Talca, around 350 kilometers to the south of the capital Santiago.

He had mainly spent time in Singapore and arrived back in Chile on February 25.

The Talca hospital's director, Alfredo Donoso, said the patient only started exhibiting coronavirus symptoms a week after returning to Chile, although those were "quite light."

"He was admitted with a high fever, but then that became normal and he is now totally free of symptoms here in the Talca hospital and is in isolation," said Donoso.

The patient is due to undergo some tests before being allowed to go home.

The two new cases brings the total number in Latin America to 17, with Ecuador (seven) and Mexico (five) the worst affected countries.

Health officials have been scrambling to contain the spread of the virus that first erupted in China and has so far killed more than 3,000 people worldwide.

Mainland China alone has recorded more than 80,000 cases and 2,943 deaths alone. Elsewhere, the main countries affected are South Korea (5,186 cases, 28 deaths), Italy (2,502 cases, 79 deaths) and Iran (2,336 cases, 77 deaths).