

## Coronavirus

## 'They saved lives'

## 'Volunteers' came to rescue as virus raged

MOSCOW, July 28, (AP) — When his mother began deteriorating from the coronavirus two weeks ago, Bektour Iskender knew that hospitals in Kyrgyzstan's capital, Bishkek, were full. So he turned to Twitter for advice.

He was directed to a volunteer group that made house calls with oxygen concentrators for patients with trouble breathing. Two hours later, volunteers in full protective gear arrived and showed Iskender how to use one of the machines he had borrowed from friends of his relatives. His mother started improving soon after using it.

"I later spoke to my friend, a doctor, and he said that it was probably a breakthrough moment," said the 35-year-old Iskender, co-founder of the Kloop online news site.

One of the poorest countries to emerge from the former Soviet Union, Kyrgyzstan has been hit hard by the coronavirus, with the outbreak pushing the Central Asian nation's outdated and poorly funded health care system to near collapse.

Armies of volunteers, however, have played a major role in filling the gaps in dealing with the crisis in the country of 6.5 million people.

"For such a small country with limited resources, volunteers did a colossal amount of work," said **Bermet Baryktabasova**, a medical expert in Bishkek. "They saved thousands of lives."



When the virus broke out in Kyrgyzstan in March, authorities imposed a tight lockdown with curfews and a heavy police presence.

With few resources to protect those who lost income while businesses were closed, officials started to ease lockdown restrictions in early May, when the country reported a little over 1,000 coronavirus cases and 12 deaths, citing economic fallout and public frustration over the lockdown. Some said the government feared unrest in the country, which has a history of political uprisings and ethnic violence.

As offices, markets and malls reopened and public transportation resumed, people rushed to get back to normal life, including traditionally large weddings and funerals that typically draw hundreds of people. Within weeks, several hundred new virus cases were being reported daily, instead of only dozens. This month, when the government began including suspected cases in the count, those figures jumped to over 1,000 a day.

## Collapse

By late July, Kyrgyzstan had reported over 33,000 cases and more than 1,300 deaths.

The teetering health care system, with only 2,036 hospital beds for virus patients in late June, started to collapse.

"The number of patients in grave condition continues to grow," tweeted Dr Yegor Borisov, ICU head at Bishkek's Emergency Medicine Center, on July 11. Medical teams were working "to the point of exhaustion," and fainting from fatigue and the heat in their protective suits, he said.

Patients complained it was impossible to find available beds in hospitals. Ambulance services didn't answer phone calls. Waits at pharmacies and outpatient clinics lasted for hours, if not days. Hospitals lacked drugs and equipment, and were often "just beds and walls," Baryktabasova said.

That's when thousands of ordinary people rushed to help. Hotels and restaurants were converted into facilities for patients. Activists found protective gear, drugs, medical supplies, and food and water for medical workers.

Prominent soccer player Aidana Otorbayeva went on Facebook, urging help for doctors and nurses. "I'm ready to volunteer. Help medical workers, run their errands, bring them food... Relieve their burden at least in some way," she wrote.

Since then, nearly 600 people have joined an online group called "Together". Dozens filled in as orderlies at seven Bishkek medical facilities.

"A common disaster united everyone, and people are doing their best not to stay away and help each other," said Meder Myrzayev, a coordinator of the group.

At night, they took people to hospitals, in place of the absent ambulances.

"They don't come in time and people are simply suffocating at home," Valeria Sadygalieva said of the shortage of ambulances. She was the founder of the Volunteer Rescue Squad, a Bishkek-based group that before the pandemic focused on searching for missing people.

When the surge of new infections hit Bishkek, her team of 15 volunteers — six of them with first-responder training and several professional medical workers among them — converted cars into makeshift ambulances equipped with oxygen tanks. They started ferrying people in respiratory distress to hospitals.

The calls from the sick initially were overwhelming, Sadygalieva told The Associated Press.

"We are weather-beaten folks, and we've seen some grief in our days, but at first it was hard to deal with such a large amount of patients in grave condition," she said.

## Communities

Sadygalieva said her team worked all night on July 22 to hospitalize six people and spoke to many others who didn't require it.

Her squad is not the only one. Local online communities and chats last week were abuzz with people offering rides to the hospital or to bring an oxygen machine to those in need.

Auto importer Ruslan ulu Manasbek used his own money to convert his car into a makeshift ambulance. With business withering during the lockdown, Manasbek spent nearly \$140 — the equivalent of more than half of last year's average monthly salary in Kyrgyzstan — to install an oxygen tank in his car so he could carry people with breathing difficulties to hospitals.

Working around the clock to transport the sick, Manasbek said he is trying to avoid contact with other members of his family.

"I have a beloved wife, a daughter, a mother. But I'm trying not to go home (as much) — I'm working in the hot 'red' zone, in direct contact with those infected, and I'm afraid to go home," he said.

By the end of last week, the outbreak appeared to ease, with the daily number of new infections stabilizing at about 800-900. On Tuesday, health officials reported 548 new infections.

The government opened additional medical facilities, relieving some pressure, and Russia deployed medical teams and equipment to help.

Hospitals reported fewer patients, and volunteers said they weren't getting as many calls at night from people gasping for breath. Experts interviewed by the AP all credited activists for filling the gaps in the response to the outbreak.

"On one hand, we had this collapse of the health care system, but on the other hand, the nation rallied around it, and the support for ordinary people was immense," said Dr Sultan Stambekov, a surgical oncologist who has spent over a month working in a coronavirus ward.

Iskender echoes that sentiment. His mother ended up not needing to be hospitalized and has since recovered. "She is eager to go out for a walk," he said with a laugh.

"I think that when we win the battle (against the virus), we will see what huge role this mobilization of the civil society played," Iskender said.



A volunteer in a protective suit and gloves sets an oxygen concentrator to help a suspected coronavirus patient breathe at her apartment in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan on July 24. (AP)

## Virus

## 'It's very much emerging science'

## Can you get the coronavirus twice?

NEW YORK, July 28, (Agencies): Can you get the coronavirus twice?

Scientists don't know for sure yet, but they believe it's unlikely.

Health experts think people who had COVID-19 will have some immunity against a repeat infection. But they don't know how much protection or how long it would last.

There have been reports of people testing positive for the virus weeks after they were believed to have recovered, leading some to think they may have been reinfected. More likely, experts say people were suffering from the same illness or the tests detected remnants of the original infection. There's also the chance tests could have been false positives.

Scientists say there has been no documented instance of a patient spreading the virus to others after retesting positive.

With similar viruses, studies have shown that people could fall sick again three months to a year after their first infections. It's still too early to know whether that's also possible with the coronavirus.

"It's very much emerging science," said Dr Philip Landrigan, director of the global public health program at Boston College.

A small US study published last week also found the antibodies that fight the coronavirus may only last a few months in people with mild illness, suggesting people could become susceptible again. But antibodies aren't the only defense against a virus, and the other parts of the immune system could also help provide protection.

Settling the question of whether reinfection is possible is important. If it can occur, that could undermine the idea of "immunity passports" for returning back to workplaces. And it would not bode well for hopes of getting a long-lasting vaccine.

## Also:

**GENEVA:** The coronavirus pandemic "continues to accelerate", with a doubling of cases over the last six weeks, the World Health Organization chief says.

WHO Director-General **Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus** says nearly 16 million cases have now been reported to the UN health agency, with

## Head of China CDC gets injected with experimental COVID vaccine

BEIJING, July 28, (AP) — The head of the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention says he has been injected with an experimental coronavirus vaccine in an attempt to persuade the public to follow suit when one is approved.

"I'm going to reveal something undercover: I am injected with one of the vaccines," Gao Fu said in a webinar Sunday hosted by Alibaba Health, an arm of the Chinese e-commerce giant, and Cell Press, an American publisher of scientific journals. "I hope it will work."

The Associated Press reported earlier this month that a state-owned Chinese company injected employees with experimental shots in March, even before the government-approved testing in people — a move that raised ethical concerns among some experts.

Gao did not say when or how he took the vaccine candidate, leaving it unclear whether he was injected as part of a government-approved human trial. He did not respond to requests for comment.

The claim underscores the enormous stakes as China competes with US and British companies to be the first with a vaccine to help end the pandemic — a feat that would be both a scientific and political triumph.

China has positioned itself to be a strong contender. Eight of the nearly two dozen potential vaccines in various stages of human testing worldwide are from China, the most of any country.

Gao declined to say which of the vaccines he was injected with, saying he didn't want to be seen as "doing some kind of propaganda" for a particular company.

Last month, Gao was a coauthor on a paper introducing one candidate, an "inactivated" vaccine made by growing the whole virus in a lab and then killing it. That candidate is being developed by an affiliate of state-owned SinoPharm.

The company previously said in an online post that 30 employees, including top executives, helped "pre-test" its vaccine in March, before it was approved for its initial human study. Scientists vehemently debate such self-experimentation, because what happens to one or a few people outside a well-designed study is not usable evidence of safety or effectiveness.

Chinese state media have also reported that employees of state-owned companies going abroad are being offered injections of the vaccine.

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tion, increased testing and hygiene and physical distancing measures.

"We are not prisoners of the pandemic. Every single one of us can make a difference," Tedros said. "The future is in our hands."

Ghebreyesus said Monday he is planning to meet with WHO emergency committee later this week to reevaluate coronavirus pandemic and provide advice in accordance with the re-evaluation.

Speaking at a news conference at the organization's headquarters in Geneva, Ghebreyesus said that the number of infections exceeded 16 million and the fatalities surpassed 640,000, with an increased pace of the cases.



Gao Fu, the head of the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention (China CDC), speaks to journalists after a press conference at the State Council Information Office in Beijing on Jan 26. (AP)



Wilmes



Bex

## Health

**765 virus cases in Japan:** Japan reported 765 new cases of the coronavirus over the last 24 hours as of 04:00 pm (0700 GMT) on Tuesday, bringing the nation's total number to 31,741, the health ministry and local authorities said.

The country's death toll rose by one to 999. The hardest-hit Tokyo confirmed 266 new infections, topping 100 for the 20th straight day, which brought the total cases in the city of about 14 million people to 11,611.

Since the country fully lifted a nationwide state of emergency late May, the number of daily new cases in the Japanese capital has been on an upward trend, including group infections in nightlife spots, workplaces and theaters. (KUNA)

**68 virus cases in China:** Chinese authorities announced 68 new coronavirus cases, including 64 local infections, without any deaths in the past 24 hours.

The new infections raised the total number of cases to 83,959 in mainland China with a death rate of 4634. Xinhua news agency quoted the Chinese National Health Commission as saying on Tuesday.

Meanwhile, 16 patients were discharged from hospitals, raising the number of recoveries to 78,934, while 391 others are still receiving medical care. (KUNA)

**5 virus deaths in Sudan:** Sudan reported, on Tuesday, 72 new cases of the coronavirus (COVID-19), putting the total at 11,496.

The number of deaths hit 725 with five new cases, indicated the health authorities. Recoveries reached 6,001 with 62 new cases. (KUNA)

**28 virus cases in SKorea:** South Korea identified 28 additional new coronavirus cases Tuesday, raising the country's total caseload to 14,203, said Yonhap News Agency.

The death toll came to 300, up one from the previous day, the Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said.

Of the newly added cases, 23 were from abroad, reporting double-digit numbers for more than a month. (KUNA)

**150 virus deaths in Russia:** Russia announced 150 coronavirus deaths and 5,395 new cases in the past 24 hours.

The total number of deaths rose to

13,504 and cases to 823,515, Russian ministry of health said on Tuesday.

It added that 8,888 people were discharged from hospitals, raising the number of recoveries to 612,217. (KUNA)

**4 virus deaths in Germany:** German health authorities reported on Tuesday four death cases and 633 positive cases from coronavirus (COVID-19) in the past 24 hours.

The president of Robert Koch Institute (RKI) Professor Dr Lothar Wieler said in



Nurse Kath Olmstead (right), gives volunteer Melissa Harting, of Harpersville, NY, an injection as part of the world's biggest study of a possible COVID-19 vaccine, developed by the National Institutes of Health and Moderna Inc, gets underway on July 27 in Binghamton, NY. (AP)

a press statement that the country's total cases rose to 206,242, while the total death toll rose to 9,122 cases.

The institute pointed to the concerns about the possibility of a new wave of the virus due to the return of German tourists from their vacations, which they spent in different countries, some of which spread the epidemic. (KUNA)

**402 virus cases in Belgium:** Belgium recorded 402 new coronavirus cases, raising the total number to 66,428 on Tuesday.

One more death from coronavirus was reported leaving the total death toll at 9,822, Belgian health authorities said.

Meanwhile, a curfew will be imposed on the entire territory of the province of Antwerp in northern Belgium.

Stopping short of imposing a new all-out lockdown, local authorities decided that all residents in the province must be home from 11:30 pm to 6:00 am.

Following a marathon 10-hour crisis meeting, Antwerp's Provincial Governor **Cathy Berx** also announced that face masks would be mandatory in all public spaces for all residents above 12 in the province.

Furthermore, Belgium will implement additional restrictions from Wednesday to prevent the growing numbers of infections from becoming a full-blown second wave, Prime Minister **Sophie Wilmes** announced yesterday. (KUNA)