

Kazakhstan: Hospital workers demand resignation of government official over spread of COVID-19

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22 April 2020

The Central Municipal Clinical Hospital in Almaty, Kazakhstan's largest city, was shut down last week after 182 staff members tested positive for the SARS-CoV-2 virus, the coronavirus which causes COVID-19. Many patients also have tested positive.

Dr. Ernar Pirimkhan told the US-funded Radio Free Europe/Liberty outlet: "Ninety-eight percent of the employees in the surgery department, where I work, have tested positive for the virus." Shortly after the interview, Pirimkhan also tested positive.

The hospital had been staffed by approximately 1,000 workers. Of the infected workers, some were transferred to a Ministry of Internal Affairs convalescent facility, while others have remained within the hospital itself, which has been placed under quarantine. The head physician was fired on April 14.

The hospital shutdown was accompanied by intense conflict between state officials and health care workers. Almaty's chief public health officer, Aizat Moldagasmova, had told a television news station on April 12 that medical workers themselves were at fault for the spread of the infection. She was recorded as saying, "One of the causes is medical workers' own lack of compliance with safety measures. They haven't had the vigilance that they're supposed to have. Perhaps they thought that this is a clinic for non-infectious diseases. Perhaps they hoped that there wouldn't actually be so many patients."

The video clip containing Moldagasmova's statement was subsequently removed from the television station's website, but many Internet users saved it and disseminated it on social media. In response, hospital doctors and other staff demanded that Moldagasmova be removed from office. In an

announcement posted on Facebook on April 13, gynecology department head Gaukhar Amireyeva declared that she and 32 other doctors plan to sue Moldagasmova for defamation.

The medical workers insist that the confusing information and lack of supplies from the city Health Department led to the situation: Initially, the hospital was not designated as a facility that would receive coronavirus patients. Health care workers were therefore neither given the necessary personal protective equipment (PPE) nor expecting to receive COVID-19 patients. However, ambulances were ordered by the city health department to take people suspected of being positive to the hospital, which had been left unprepared to deal with them.

One doctor told RFE/RL: "Ambulance workers clad in [personal protective equipment (PPE)] brought the patients with fever and symptoms of pneumonia to our hospital's internal-diseases department...transporting them through a common corridor. It's an airborne infection [and] many employees in the department got infected. We tried to isolate the department as much as we could. [Eventually,] we got protective clothing."

In a blatant attempt to suppress criticism and opposition by the workers, authorities hospitalized Amireyeva on April 14, one day after the letter demanding Moldagasmova's resignation was issued, despite the fact that she had tested negative for the virus the previous day and was in good health. These efforts backfired as Amireyeva's supporters video recorded her attempted hospitalization and then spread those videos on social media as well. The city government quickly released her and issued a public apology, claiming that her name had accidentally been confused

with the name of another worker at the hospital who happens to bear the same initials.

The confrontation between health care workers and the government comes as the country, whose first COVID-19 case appeared on March 13, has been in a national state of emergency since March 15. Severe lockdown and social distancing measures have been enacted in the country's major cities, including Almaty, Nur-Sultan, and Shymkent. While the official total number of cases in the country as of April 21 was 1,995, with 19 deaths, the government's response to the crisis has been characterized by extreme inconsistency, disarray, and repressive control over news sources and any travel by citizens outside their homes.

Among other measures, video surveillance systems have been activated in the cities to ensure that people leaving their homes do so only within the strict boundaries of shelter-in-place orders.

As of April 17, 423, or approximately one-quarter, of the country's coronavirus cases were among medical personnel, with over half of those cases in Almaty. Almaty's Children's Municipal Clinical Hospital for Infectious Diseases also reported 30 positive tests among hospital staff.

Conditions similar to those confronting health care workers at the Central Municipal Clinical Hospital in Almaty prevail across the country and internationally.

Tolkynay Ordabayeva, an infectious disease specialist from Jambyl Region told RFE/RL that she came to work on April 2 and 3 with a high fever from COVID-19 because she was the only such specialist available in the Merki District, which is home to nearly 85,000 people. She went on to explain that nurses had been compelled to make their own masks as hospital supplies ran low; she had received dirty PPE from hospital administration; and that she had been compelled to release coronavirus patients without testing due to a deficit of tests.

Similar horrifying reports about conditions in hospitals have emerged from the US, which has the highest number of recorded cases of any country in the world; Great Britain, where over 100 health care workers have died from COVID-19; and Russia, where nurses and doctors have walked out of their jobs for lack of PPE. Mass protests by health care workers have also taken place in Latin America .

The Kazakh government is acutely aware of these rising class tensions internationally and is exercising strict control over information on the conditions of the coronavirus pandemic. A government website on the pandemic, www.coronavirus2020.kz , contains a “Fake News and Fact-checking” section that, among other matters, reported on April 5 that a health care worker was arrested for allegedly spreading false information.

The Kazakhstan economy is expected to shrink precipitously, not only as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, but also due to the drop in oil prices. The government has promised a 42,500 tenge (about US\$99) monthly subsidy during the state of emergency to all workers and self-employed individuals who have either lost their jobs or been forced into temporary leave. According to the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection, as of April 17, 6.7 million people had applied for the meager payment (i.e., more than one third of the country's total population) and 3.5 million had already received it. The total amount of emergency government subsidies paid to individuals will be many times exceeded by emergency government subsidies to businesses, which are expected to run in several trillions of tenge.



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