Nearly 1,200 workers contract COVID-19 at remote Siberian goldmine

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Nearly 1,200 workers at a goldmine deep in the Siberian wilderness have come down with COVID-19. The virus was first detected at the Olimpiada mining and processing plant on May 8 and has spread uncontrolled ever since. About 20 percent of the facility's workforce is now infected. Coronavirus cases and fatalities continue to climb in Russia as a whole, with the country now having more than 350,000 known infections and 3,633 official deaths.

Yegor Korchagin, the chief doctor at the regional hospital in Krasnoyarsk—which at 350 miles to the south is the nearest major city to the mining operation—attributed the outbreak to crowded conditions. When the first cases appeared, sickened miners received care from on-site medics. Shortly after, further medical personnel arrived, many of whom also then fell ill, but work continued at the mine.

Korchagin said that about 700 of those infected are asymptomatic, while others are moderately to severely sick. Given the total number of infections at the mine, this would mean hundreds of workers are in need of medical care.

The mine quickly became one of the main hotspots for the spread of the coronavirus in Russia. On May 14, the US-funded Radio Free Europe/Liberty reported that the National Guard had been deployed to the plant. One miner told the outlet: "If the infection has already spread, we'll all get infected. Everyone understands this and people are already losing their nerve. They brought in the National Guard so that we don't start a riot, surrounded us like in prisons with patrols everywhere." At the time, the miners, including those receiving medical treatment, were reportedly forbidden to leave the site under the threat of significant fines and even imprisonment.

With the aid of the military, a field hospital was eventually set up at the Olimpiada plant, which is owned by Russia's largest gold producer, Polyus. However, relatives of the miners have been pleading for weeks for the company to extract their ill family members, as they cannot get to a major hospital on their own because the remoteness of the mine requires evacuation by helicopter or other heavy-duty transport.

On May 22, the news outlet Babr24 broadcast the story related by the wife of one miner:

"On May 15 the husband started to have trouble breathing. At the on-site clinic, they weren't able to do anything to help. Only after many calls from relatives did they take an x-ray, which showed bilateral pneumonia. Through an acquaintance, they managed to get him transferred to the Northern-Yeniseysk Hospital—Polyus did not provide the transportation. An ambulance took the patient.

"In the hospital, they had to put him in an induced coma. He needed to be transferred to Krasnoyarsk, however at the regional hospital they said Polyus was obligated to get the patient out. Only after turning to the TV channel 'Yenisey' did they [Polyus] send a medical helicopter."

The only statement issued by Polyus, which boasts the third largest gold reserves in the world, on the coronavirus situation at its mine was on May 10. It insisted that miners were receiving "the best medical care" and assured investors of "uninterrupted operations." The company describes itself on its website as "a top 10 gold producer with one of the lowest cost profiles." It is majority owned by Said Kerimov, the 24-year-old son of the billionaire Russian oligarch Sulyeman Kerimov. Alongside a number of other Russian stakeholders, on its board sit Canadian and British businessmen with extensive ties to the US financial elite.

Elsewhere in Russia, COVID-19 continues to spread as well, despite President Vladimir Putin's insistence over this past weekend that the situation in the country is under control. In Moscow, the center of the outbreak, an overburdened ambulance system is unable to respond to residents' calls. It was just reported that there are now 980 COVID-19 cases among workers in federal prisons and 238 cases among inmates.

Health care workers across the country continue to protest a lack of personal protective equipment (PPE), the government's failure to pay promised bonuses, and false official reporting of mortality among doctors.

Dagestan, a region in Russia's north Caucasus, is being particularly hard hit by coronavirus. For weeks there have been competing claims about the number of COVID-19 infections and deaths in the area, with press outlets and local residents insisting that the numbers are significantly higher than that reported by government representatives in Moscow.

As of May 25, there have officially been 4,205 cases in Dagestan. Earlier in the month, however, the regional health minister said that when COVID-19 and community-acquired pneumonia are counted together, there had already been 13,697 cases and 657 deaths. The mufti of Dagestan, the top religious leader in the majority-Muslim region, recently stated that 50 doctors have died of coronavirus and that there are many unrecorded fatalities because people are dying in their homes without ever receiving treatment.

Even according to official estimates, Dagestan accounts for most of the COVID-19 mortality in the north Caucasus. In the capital city Makhachkala, masks and gloves are being distributed at the entry to markets and disinfecting stations are being set up around the city. The neighboring oblast of Kalmyk has sealed its border with the mountainous republic. Ramzan Kadyrov, the leader of Chechnya, which lies to Dagestan's west, has reportedly been hospitalized with the virus.

In a sign of growing anxiety in the country's capital over the COVID-19 situation on Dagestan, on May 23 the military was dispatched to the region as part of the efforts to build two "observational" field hospitals—locations to which people suspected of having or having been exposed to COVID-19 can be kept in isolation. Each has 35 tents capable of holding 20 people. The erection of these facilities follows on the heels of the construction of a facility intended to treat coronavirus victims, staffed with doctors from around Moscow.

The billionaire oligarch Sulyeman Kerimov—father of the owner of the Polyus goldmine, originally from Dagestan, and the region's representative at the federal level—allegedly donated 1.5 billion rubles (US$21 million) to the fight against coronavirus in Dagestan. It is unclear, however, where these funds, if they ever existed, have gone.

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