

Russia says growth of new coronavirus cases stopped

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Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin said Monday the growth in new coronavirus cases had been stopped as Russia reported under 9,000 infections for the first time since the beginning of the month.

With more than 290,000 cases as of Monday, Russia has recorded the

world's largest number of infections after the United States.

Mishustin, the highest ranking Russian official to have tested positive, said the situation in the country was improving and dozens of regions were ready to gradually ease restrictions.

"The situation with the spread of the coronavirus infection remains difficult, but we can still acknowledge that we managed to put a stop to the growth of infections," Mishustin told a government meeting.

Russia began easing nationwide lockdown restrictions last week and announced the national football league would restart in late June.

The country on Monday reported under 9,000 virus infections for the first time since the beginning of May, after seeing a steady daily rise of around 10,000 cases for more than two weeks.

It was the lowest number of new virus cases reported by officials since May 1, when Russia announced 7,933 new infections.

Speaking to a task force responsible for the country's response to the coronavirus epidemic, Mishustin said that the number of Russians recovering from the illness was growing.

"More and more people are recovering and being discharged from hospitals," Mishustin said.

"We see in this the result of the systematic work that has been carried out in Russia over the past two months," he said.

According to the official tally published Monday, 2,722 patients recovered over the last 24 hours and more than 70,000 Russians are no longer infected with the coronavirus.

The prime minister said a nationwide lockdown imposed in late March had played an important role in slowing the rate of new cases.

'Prevent explosive growth'

He said that the strict isolation regime "allowed us to gain time and prevent an explosive increase in the rate, as was the case in a number of foreign countries."

Russia's consumer health watchdog chief Anna Popova said this weekend that the growth in new cases was slowing and the country has "moved towards the level of stability that we've all been waiting for".

Health officials Monday also announced 91 new deaths, down from Saturday's figure of 119 that was the highest daily toll yet.

Russia's total number of fatalities now stands at 2,722, which is considerably lower than in many other countries hit hard by the pandemic.

Critics have cast doubt on Russia's low official mortality rate, accusing authorities of under-reporting in order to play down the scale of the crisis.

An unofficial list of deaths among medics started by a group of Russian doctors listed 222 names as of Monday, including some from neighbouring Belarus.

Many medical workers in Russia have complained of shortages of protective gear and said doctors and nurses are dying at a higher rate in the country than elsewhere.

Russian health officials say one of the reasons the count is lower is that

only deaths directly caused by the virus are being included.

Deputy Prime Minister Tatiana Golikova over the weekend denied manipulation of the numbers, saying hospitals had a financial interest in identifying infections because they are allocated more money to treat coronavirus patients.

Authorities also say that since the virus came later to Russia, there was more time to prepare hospital beds and launch widescale testing to slow the spread.

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