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UN: Nearly 100 Drug Users Died in Crimea After Russia Closed Methadone Program

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People walk out of the cool waters of the Black Sea, as winter swimming fans gather on a beach on the Orthodox Christmas day in the Crimean port of Yevpatoriya, Jan. 7.

The United Nations' AIDS envoy on Wednesday sounded the alarm over what he described as an impending health catastrophe in Russia's newly acquired Crimean Peninsula, where he said nearly 100 recovering drug addicts have died since the spring as a result of Russia's abolishment of a methadone program.

"The causes of death, from what we have been hearing, are mainly from suicide and overdose," Michel Kazatchkine was cited as saying by Agence France-Presse on Wednesday.

Prior to Russia's annexation of Crimea in March, 805 people were receiving opioid substitution therapy to beat their heroin addiction under Ukrainian rule, Kazatchkine said, but since Russia took over and cut off treatment "between 80 and 100" of them have died.

Methadone treatment is supported by the UN, endorsed by the World Health Organization and recognized as an effective form of treatment in most Western countries, but Russian law forbids the use of methadone in drug rehabilitation programs.

Speaking of the rapid policy changes in Crimea after Russia took the reins, Kazatchkine said drug users were "left with impossible choices. ... To them, it was a sort of unbearable transition, from a state of social, psychological and physical stability back to street drugs and stress."

In addition to the deaths caused by untreated withdrawal symptoms, the ban on methadone in Crimea also threatened to trigger a full-blown HIV epidemic, because drug users may go back to injecting street drugs if they can no longer get safe, supervised injections of methadone, Kazatchkine said.

"This is the region where, firstly, the AIDS epidemic continues to grow and, secondly, where the AIDS epidemic is largely dependent on people who use drugs," he was quoted by Agence France-Presse as saying.

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