

First Death in Russia's Arctic Anthrax Outbreak

Yamal-Nenets autonomous region on high alert amid multiple cases of infection

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A 12-year old was announced as the first victim of a rare outbreak of anthrax in northern Russia's Yamal-Nenets autonomous region Monday as the deadly virus appears to leapfrog from local reindeer populations to humans.

The boy was under supervision in a local hospital when he died, according to a statement from regional governor Dmitry Kobylnik. The Kremlin-friendly tabloid LifeNews reported Monday the boy's grandmother died last week after eating reindeer meat infected with the virus.

"The infection has shown its guile. Returning after 75 years it has taken the life of a child,"

said Kobylin.

The anthrax outbreak is believed to have begun last month when unusually high temperatures caused the corpse of a reindeer, which died decades ago and was infected with anthrax, to thaw. Living reindeer, weakened by the heat, ate the unfrozen remains — and then transmitted the virus to local nomad herders. ☒☒

There are occasional cases of anthrax among livestock populations in countries across the world, including Russia, but human deaths are very rare since the disease was largely eradicated after the development of an effective vaccine in the middle of the 20th century.

Nine people have so far been officially diagnosed with anthrax and 72 people are currently in hospital suspected of suffering from the infection in the Yamal-Nenets autonomous region, according to the statement from Kobylin. ☒☒

A total of 2,349 reindeer have also died as a result of the anthrax outbreak, Interfax reported Monday, citing local officials. However, several experts attributed the reindeer deaths to the high temperatures and other diseases.

Over 200 personnel, including military specialists in biological warfare, were dispatched to the region to help combat the disease last week. Most of their efforts are concentrated on finding reindeer corpses that could harbor the virus. Once discovered, the dead animals are doused in chlorine and will later be incinerated, according to officials cited by Russia's Kommersant newspaper last week.

Anthrax can kill a reindeer within three days of infecting them, Vladimir Bogdanov, a biology professor at the Russian Academy of Sciences, told the RBC news website last week. The Yamal-Nenets autonomous region authorities stopped vaccinating reindeer 10 years ago because there had been no anthrax outbreaks for more than half a century, he added.

A quarantine was declared July 25 in the infected parts of the Yamal-Nenets autonomous region, which is home to about half a million people. Thousands of reindeer have received emergency vaccinations and dozens of local nomad herders have been evacuated by helicopter from the worst affected areas. ☒☒

There are about 254,000 reindeer in the Yamal-Nenets autonomous region, Interfax reported Monday.

Scientists have warned in recent years that rising average temperatures in northern Russia could lead to the melting of the area's permafrost, which contains hundreds of thousands of reindeer corpses. This could include many that died of the disease when it was prevalent in the area. The anthrax virus is believed to be able to survive for about 100 years in such conditions.

"It is impossible to completely eradicate a disease," said Valery Shulgovsky, a biology professor at Moscow State University.

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