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Stay or Go? French Fly Home from Russia Amid Pandemic

By Romain Colas for AFP

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Igor Ivanko / Moskva News Agency

Christian Querouix, a 69-year-old pensioner, who shares his time between France and Russia, had a difficult choice to make.

Should he return to France, one of the European countries most affected by the coronavirus, or stay in Russia where the number of infected people is growing by the day?

"I have diabetes and I am running out of my meds," Querouix told AFP at Moscow's Sheremetyevo airport ahead of his repatriation flight amid the coronavirus pandemic.

"Otherwise I would not go back because of all the crap in France and because it is better here," said the wheelchair-bound man, sporting a home-made mask.

Querouix was among some 170 people who on Saturday left Moscow on a repatriation flight organized by the French embassy.

Most of the passengers of the plane chartered by Air France were French but also included Swiss, Belgians, Germans and Britons.

"There is also a family with a little boy who has serious eye disease and will undergo surgery in Lausanne," French ambassador Pierre Levy said at the airport.

The embassy had to act quickly after Russian flag carrier Aeroflot this week announced the suspension of its flights to Paris.

'Better to be sick in France

Josephine de Gouville, who studied in Saint Petersburg, said she was saddened to leave.

"I was just in the middle of my six-month exchange programme," the 22-year-old said, adding, however, she was happy to return to a country with a "familiar healthcare system."

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Renata Levexier, a 52-year-old Franco-Polish woman, struck a similar note.

"I prefer to be sick in France than here," said Levexier, who works in Russia. "I am not 100 percent sure that the information concerning the epidemic in Russia is reliable."

Russia has reported more than 4,700 coronavirus cases and 43 fatalities but officials say the actual number of the infected could be higher.

This week, President Vladimir Putin announced the extension of a lockdown period in Russia to slow the spread of the coronavirus until April 30.

He first announced a week-long break from work in a rare televised address last week as part of a series of escalating measures to help slow the virus spread in Russia.

Authorities earlier had said they will no longer bring home thousands of Russians trapped abroad due to the suspension of flights.

But Deputy Prime Minister Tatyana Golikova said on Saturday that officials planned to resume repatriation flights shortly.

There is also a lack of clarity regarding future repatriation flights for foreigners.

"But it's not in the interests of the authorities to have foreigners floating around here," said Levy, the French ambassador -- unless they themselves decide to stay behind.

Alain, who had come all the way from Kaluga, a city some 190 kilometers southwest of Moscow, to board the flight, changed his mind at the last minute.

"The plane is full and you have 200 people breathing the same air-conditioned air," Alain, who refused to give his last name, told AFP outside the terminal.

"And if someone has the coronavirus it's possible he'll give it to everyone else," said the 68-

year-old expatriate.

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