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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russian PM Recovers From Virus as Infection Rates Slow

By Jonathan Brown for AFP

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Mishustin's duties had been carried out by a deputy since April 30, while the prime minister was receiving medical treatment. **Dmitry Astakhov / POOL / TASS**

Russia's Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin returned to his duties on Tuesday after recovering from the coronavirus, as total infections approached 300,000 and officials said new cases were dropping off.

President Vladimir Putin signed a decree reinstating Mishustin as the head of government, nearly three weeks after the prime minister announced on television he had tested positive for coronavirus.

Related article: Russian PM Mishustin Diagnosed With Coronavirus

Mishustin checked himself into hospital and his deputy was named interim prime minister,

but he continued to participate in meetings via video-link wearing a suit and tie.

The 54-year-old former tax chief was appointed prime minister in a surprise government shake-up earlier this year but had little time to make an impact before the coronavirus pandemic hit.

His reinstatement came after health officials reported 9,263 new infections in Russia over the last 24 hours, bringing the total to 299,941, the second-highest in the world after the United States.

Mishustin was just one of several high-ranking Russian officials to have been infected, including the ministers of culture, education and construction, as well as Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov.

The prime minister said Monday that Russia had stopped the growth of new infections, but cautioned that the situation remained "difficult."

He credited a nationwide lockdown and "systematic work" over the past two months for slowing the rate of new infections.

The Kremlin last week eased nationwide anti-virus measures imposed in March and Mishustin said Monday that dozens of regions throughout the country were ready to gradually lift lockdown orders.

Tuesday's tally saw new cases fall below 10,000 for the fourth day in a row, after Monday's count saw new infections under 9,000 for the first time since the beginning of May.

A majority of infections in Russia are centralised in the capital, which has extended its lockdown until the end of May, with residents only allowed to leave their homes for brief trips to a shop, to walk dogs or to travel to essential jobs with a permit.

Dagestan emerges as hotspot

Yet Putin this week said the emerging hotspot of Dagestan in Russia's North Caucasus required urgent attention after a top official this weekend said hundreds of people in the region might have died from the virus.

"All of Russia will be with Dagestan now," Putin said, addressing residents of the region after a local health official said nearly 700 may have died from the virus including 40 medics.

The region's biggest celebrity, Mixed Martial Arts fighter Khabib Nurmagomedov, appealed to residents to follow containment rules as his father was put on a ventilator after catching the coronavirus.

The undefeated UFC lightweight champion took to Instagram late Monday to urge people in the southern Russian region to be "disciplined" and to "listen to our doctors" during the epidemic.

A nationwide government tally on Tuesday reported 115 new coronavirus fatalities since the last update, bringing Russia's total to 2,837.

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.

Russian health officials say one of the reasons the count is lower than in the United States and parts of western Europe is that only deaths directly caused by the virus are being included.

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

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