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Kazakhstan Denies China's Claim of New Deadly Virus

By AFP

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Jaafar Ashtiyeh / AFP

Kazakhstan on Friday denied a claim by China's embassy that a pneumonia outbreak more deadly than the novel coronavirus is rampaging through the Central Asian country.

In an alert for Chinese citizens posted on the embassy's website Thursday, Beijing warned of a disease with "a mortality rate far higher than Covid-19."

The statement said the pneumonia outbreak had caused 1,772 deaths in the first half of 2020 and "628 in June alone."

The statement originally referred to "Kazakhstan pneumonia" but this wording was later changed to "non-Covid pneumonia."

The embassy statement mentioned three provincial cities — Atyrau, Aktobe and Shymkent — saying the disease has taken hold there and Chinese nationals are among those who have died

from it.

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The Kazakh health ministry is studying the disease and comparing it to Covid-19, the embassy said.

Kazakhstan's health ministry said Friday that the claim published by "Chinese media" does not "correspond to reality", without mentioning the embassy.

The ministry acknowledged it had classified as pneumonia cases where Covid-19 symptoms were present but the patient tested negative, arguing that this falls within World Health Organization guidelines.

The oil-rich country bordering China and Russia has seen virus cases grow more than fivefold since lifting lockdown measures and has confirmed 54,747 cases.

Kazakhstan and other Central Asian states have been accused in recent weeks of underplaying the scale of their second wave of cases by classifying many as pneumonia.

Lack of good quality testing kits is widely cited as a reason for underreporting.

In an article covering the health ministry's rebuttal, pro-government website Tengri News cited a doctor as saying the surge in pneumonia cases was "a manifestation of the coronavirus."

In neighboring Kyrgyzstan, the health ministry said this week that it would begin including patients with pneumonia in its official coronavirus count.

Kazakhstan has not said whether it will do the same.

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Last month the foreign ministry of Turkmenistan, another Central Asian country, dismissed as "fake news" a U.S. embassy health alert warning Americans of potential coronavirus cases in the country.

Turkmenistan is one of the few countries yet to declare a single coronavirus case.

The U.S. embassy said it had "received reports of local citizens with symptoms consistent with Covid-19 undergoing Covid-19 testing and being placed in quarantine in infectious diseases hospitals for up to 14 days."

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