The Coronavirus Is Crippling Baikonur, the City That Sends Humans Into Space

Covid-19 came late to the Kazakh city rented by Russia. It now threatens to overrun the vital spaceport.

By Pjotr Sauer

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Baikonur is located in the desert steppes of Kazakhstan. **Sergei Savostyanov / TASS**

In blistering 40-degree-Celsius heat Gulnat Kadirbeyeva drives around the outskirts of Baikonur delivering water and basic medicine to people battling severe coronavirus symptoms at home in cramped tower blocks. Many are decorated with large murals of rockets, a constant reminder of the city's spaceport that is Russia's launchpad into space.

An administrator at a construction company by day, Kadirbeyeva has been volunteering with three friends since July 13 after seeing many of her neighbors and relatives falling ill and finding themselves unable to get help in the two hospitals treating Covid-19 patients in the city.

"It feels like we are living in a zombie town, so many are ill, people are dying. We decided to take matters into our own hands and started crowdfunding and delivering goods to homes," 24-year old Kadirbeyeva told The Moscow Times by phone.

The U.S.S.R. established Baikonur in the desert steppes of modern-day Kazakhstan in 1955, at the start of the Cold War space race. Until recently it was the only launchpad in the world sending piloted flights into space.

A decade later, the Soviets built a custom-made city 40 kilometers from the space center to cater for its every need. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan and Russia's new governments agreed that Moscow would rent Baikonur, and in 2005 the lease was extended until 2050. Most of the 40,000 people who live in Baikonur work for Russia's space agency Rosksosmos or provide services for those who do.

While locals like Kadirbeyeva have been witnessing firsthand the impact of the virus on their city for over a month, the outside world first got a sense of the gravity of the situation last week, when deputy director of Russia's Federal Biomedical Agency Vladimir Romanov announced that 30 people in Baikonur had [died](#) from the virus in June.

A day later, Roscosmos chief Dmitriy Rogozin [described](#) the situation in the city as "very difficult," strong words from an official in a country that has been accused of downplaying the threat of the coronavirus.

In interviews with The Moscow Times, medics, Roscosmos staff and other residents of Baikonur painted a grim picture of a city in the grip of the coronavirus.

Opened too soon

Baikonur's first brush with the coronavirus came when Yevgeny Mikrin, designer general of the Energia aerospace and defense corporation, died from Covid-19 after attending the April 9 [launch](#) of a three-man crew to the International Space Station in a Russian capsule.

A month later, Kazakhstan lifted its strict lockdown measures, confident it had the virus under control. But since then, a second wave of infection has hit, leading the country to be seen as the [showcase](#) example of opening up too soon.

As of Monday, the central Asian country had logged over 70,000 cases and 585 deaths.

Kazakhstan has also [registered](#) 234,000 cases of pneumonia this year, 56,809 of them in the first week of July alone. The World Health Organization [believes](#) the pneumonia outbreak, which has killed 3,300 people this year, to be undiagnosed coronavirus cases.

Like the rest of the country, Baikonur has seen a spike in coronavirus cases since early June, apparently brought by seasonal workers from other regions of Kazakhstan.

On June 25, the Baikonur authorities [reinstated](#) strict curbs because of the resurgence of the virus, putting the city in lockdown and declaring a night curfew.

"We have been completely overwhelmed, the virus has spread so fast, we did not expect it," said a nurse at Baikonur's general hospital.

They said the hospital's total of 70 beds have been filled and there is currently not enough space or equipment to treat patients with coronavirus symptoms. While the official death count stands at 30, the nurse said the medical team believes the death count is above 100.

Related article: [Kazakhstan Denies China's Claim of New Deadly Virus](#)

Esbulat Zhetkergenov, 28, a local businessman who runs a small transportation company said he has been getting "unnerving" daily calls from relatives of the deceased with requests to transport their bodies, as the local funeral industry appears to be unable to deal with the death toll from the virus.

Underscoring the severity of the situation, Russia has over the last two weeks sent three aircraft carrying medical specialists and equipment to Baikonur.

Blurred responsibility

Baikonur's unusual status means that coronavirus statistics are hard to verify. In normal times the city is closed, and outsiders, including Kazakhs, need permission to enter. Under quarantine, checkpoints have been set up to shield the city from the rest of Kazakhstan.

Most of its coronavirus patients are being treated at the Central Medical Hospital run by the Russian Federal Medical Biological Agency, and there is confusion over which country is responsible for registering the coronavirus statistics.

On June 7, Kazakhstan's Vice-Minister of Healthcare Azhar Giniyat said Baikonur's coronavirus numbers are being included in the county's Kyzylorda region's statistics.

However, in official online statistics provided by Kazakhstan, The Moscow Times found that Baikonur's official death toll of 30 was not added to the count, as Kyzylorda region's death toll [stands](#) at seven.

A search through Russia's official coronavirus [registry](#) shows that the country also hasn't been including Baikonur in its official count.

Related article: [Central Asian Migrants Worst Hit by Coronavirus Job Losses in Russia](#)

Local residents said they feel the city is falling through the cracks.

"If deaths here aren't counted or registered, which country is ultimately responsible for them?" a cook working for Roskosmos who lost his older brother to the virus told The Moscow Times.

As infection rates increase, signs of tensions between ethnic Kazakhs, who make up to 70% of the population, and Russians are also brewing.

On [social media](#), ethnic Kazakhs have expressed worries that Russia sent medics to treat the Russian workers at Roscosmos.

"Once Moscow is done launching its spaceships, they will forget about us again. No planes, doctors or medicine,"

Similar sentiments were echoed in a WhatsApp chat with over 200 residents set up to discuss the city's response to the virus seen by The Moscow Times.

A medic at the Central Medical Hospital rejected that idea, although they said Roscosmos staff were more likely to have the health insurance needed for treatment at the hospital.

In an attempt to soothe the mood, the head of the city's administration Konstantin Busygin issued a statement on Friday calling for unity in the city.

"Sometimes you read discussions about what is happening in town 'who is at fault, Russia or Kazakhstan?' and you feel bemused. Like always, we can only succeed together," the statement said.

The show must go on

Despite the daily reality in Baikonur, Russia's space chief Rogozin has said the launch of the unmanned Progress MS–15 cargo spacecraft planned for Thursday is going ahead.

"I am not going to move anything. I am sure we will have enough specialists and needed resources to complete this launch," Rogozin said.

He added that Roscosmos cannot delay the launch as it will deliver "all the necessities" needed for the daily operation of the ISS station.

On June 10, Roscosmos issued a statement saying none of its workers have been infected with the virus.

The Moscow Times spoke with three employees at Roscosmos in Baikonur who have been diagnosed with the virus since then, as well as two workers at TsENKI, a subsidiary of Roskosmos. All five said they are experiencing mild symptoms and self–isolating.

For now, Roscosmos employees are confident the space launchpad will be able to continue its vital work, but they said they are worried the virus will spread through the city.

"Baikonur city is inseparable from the launchpad. We have got to get this virus under control or there will be no one left to work there," said a Roscosmos engineer.

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