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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Stalin Victims Commemoration Moves Online Due to Coronavirus

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Participants of the "Returning the Names" ceremony normally gather outside the former KGB headquarters every Oct. 29 to read the names, ages and professions of those who died in Stalin's purges. **Vladimir Gerdo / TASS**

An annual commemoration held in honor of victims of Stalinist repressions has moved online Thursday due to the coronavirus pandemic, its organizers said.

Participants of the "Returning the Names" ceremony traditionally gather outside the former KGB headquarters in central Moscow every Oct. 29 to read the names, ages and professions of those who died in Stalin's purges. As many as 30 million are believed to have been killed during the Soviet-era repressions.

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"We can't gather with you today at the square by the Solovetsky Stone, but each of us, wherever we are, can remember these people," Memorial's co-founder Yelena Zhemkova said

at the launch of the event.

The Memorial human rights group said on the event's website that Russians wishing to commemorate the date could bring flowers to the monuments for victims of repression in their cities. Other cities where mass gatherings are not banned could file for permission to hold in-person commemorations, said Memorial, which has organized "Returning the Names" on the same date for the past 14 years.

Cities including St. Petersburg, Ufa and Rostov plan to commemorate the victims in-person on either Thursday or Friday, the Kommersant business daily reported.

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Authorities in Russia's fourth-largest city of Yekaterinburg cited the coronavirus pandemic when banning the in-person gathering, the publication said.

Authorities in the city of Kirov 800 kilometers east of Moscow reportedly banned "Returning the Names," saying it could disrupt a nearby drama theater which had canceled its performances due to Covid-19.

Memorial, which has been labeled a "foreign agent" in Russia for receiving money from abroad, has been increasingly targeted by the Russian government and pro-Kremlin vigilantes over its work.

In 2018, Amnesty International called on the Russian authorities to put an end to what it called a coordinated assault on the NGO.

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