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Officials Seek to Reassure Public After Irkutsk Anti-Plague Institute Worker's Death

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The hospital in Shelekhov, Irkutsk region. **yandex.ru/maps**

Russian health authorities maintain that the health situation in Siberia's Irkutsk region remains stable amid concerns surrounding the death of a lab worker at a local anti-plague facility, state media reported Sunday.

The female employee of the Irkutsk Anti-Plague Research Institute of Siberia and the Far East was hospitalized last Tuesday with symptoms of severe pneumonia and died on Thursday.

The lab worker was diagnosed with "pneumonia of unknown etiology," according to a statement from consumer safety watchdog Rospotrebnadzor cited by Interfax.

Media reports have described the suspected infection as pneumonic plague, which affects the lungs and can spread between humans through respiratory droplets.

Alexei Tsydenov, head of the neighboring republic of Buryatia, initially claimed the employee

had died of the plague, before modifying his statement with the word “maybe.”

Rospotrebnadzor said that laboratory analysis of material from the patient did not reveal any microorganisms associated with her work handling dangerous pathogens.

Earlier reports claimed the lab worker may have broken a test tube containing live bacteria.

According to Interfax, the institute’s special commission and Rospotrebnadzor concluded that no emergency or security breach had occurred. The watchdog noted that no other infectious disease complaints had been registered among institute employees over the preceding 10 days.

Related article: Nearly 200 People Under Observation After Irkutsk Lab Worker Dies From Plague

Rospotrebnadzor said all close contacts were placed under medical observation with daily laboratory testing, which detected two cases of Covid-19 and two cases of rhinovirus, but no other infections.

Irkutsk region Governor Igor Kobzev said in a video published Monday that family members and close relatives under quarantine could be discharged next week.

Local media reported that, contrary to earlier reports, area hospitals continued to operate on standard schedules aside from localized precautions.

The Kremlin on Monday referred all questions about the issue to Rospotrebnadzor.

U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio said Monday that Washington was closely monitoring the situation.

"We're watching and monitoring it closely," Rubio told reporters before leaving for a trip to Europe. "I don't think it's cause for alarm, but it is cause for focus and a cause just to keep an eye on it."

Rubio, citing what Russia has released about the death, said it seemed there was a worker in the lab who was infected and there was concern the disease may have spread internally.

"There's very limited travel between the U.S. and Russia, obviously,” he said. "But like anything else, something like that gets out, it just quickly spreads."

A European Commission spokesperson said Monday that Europe was also “very closely” monitoring the situation.

“We are aware of the reports concerning the laboratory incident in Russia, seemingly involving a pathogen-causing plague,” the spokesperson said.

Plague is endemic to Siberia, the location of the first known prehistoric human outbreak, as the bacterium that causes it, Yersinia pestis, is present among the small wild mammals in its vast wilderness and their fleas. It is rare for Russians to fall ill with plague, however, though

cases in other parts of the world — notably Africa — occur every year.

Reuters contributed reporting.

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