

Alarm in Bosnia as COVID deaths increase

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A Bosnian woman wearing a protective face mask in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina. (Photo: Fehim Demir/EPA/EFE)

Sarajevo, March 17 (RHC)-- Alarm is growing in Bosnia over the escalating coronavirus crisis in the Sarajevo canton, which has recorded the highest rate of cases and deaths in the Western Balkans. In the

two weeks to March 14, the canton of Bosnia's capital registered 1,763 cases and 31.5 deaths per 100,000 inhabitants, according to data by the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control.

The number of daily deaths is double the high of 335 registered in March last year, an early peak of the pandemic. "The death toll in Sarajevo in March has never – except maybe during the [1992-1995] war – been higher," a local news website reported.

The government has been under pressure to start vaccinating its population of 3.3 million en masse, but 12 weeks after the European Union and neighbouring Serbia started their inoculation programmes, the country so far has only received some 50,000 vaccines – mostly from donations.

Most recently, on Tuesday, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan promised to donate 30,000 vaccines after meeting with Bosnia's three presidents in Ankara.

Bosnia had ordered 2.1 million vaccines under the global COVAX scheme, but deliveries have been delayed and it is still unclear when the country can procure its first vaccines from distributors.

Adding to the crisis, there have been few physical distancing measures in place for much of the year and a lax attitude towards masks. Indoor spaces such as cafes and clubs have been open at full capacity until recently when it became apparent that cases and deaths were spiking.

Vedran Zubic, a high school teacher in Sarajevo, told Al Jazeera that he knows of dozens of people who have been infected in recent weeks, and at least 10 people who have been hospitalised due to COVID-19. "People are waiting in line to arrange a funeral," Zubic said.

"When everything [in Europe] was closing, we were a self-proclaimed 'corona-free zone'. People were coming [into the country], dozens of buses from the Jahorina (skiing) mountain were coming into the city, cafes and shopping centres were open. Only schools were closed.

"Meanwhile, the government was unable to purchase vaccines ... there has been no action, and people are not protecting themselves."

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