

Russia orders non-working week after record COVID deaths

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Moscow, October 21 (RHC)-- Russian President Vladimir Putin has ordered the country's workers to stay off work for a week starting later this month amid rising coronavirus infection and death numbers.

The government task force on Wednesday reported 1,028 COVID deaths during the previous 24 hours, the highest number since the start of the pandemic. That brought Russia's total death toll to 226,353, which is by far the highest in Europe.

Putin said he supported the Cabinet's proposal to introduce a non-working period starting October 30 and extending through the following week, when four of seven days already are state holidays. He added in some regions where the situation is the most threatening, the non-working period could start as early as

Saturday and be extended after November 7.

“Our task today is to protect life and health of our citizens and minimise the consequences of the dangerous infection,” Putin said in a video call with top officials on Wednesday.

Russia’s daily coronavirus mortality numbers have been surging for weeks and topped 1,000 for the first time during the weekend amid sluggish vaccination rates, lax public attitudes towards taking precautions and the government’s reluctance to toughen restrictions.

About 45 million Russians, or 32 percent of the country’s nearly 146 million people, are fully vaccinated. Putin on Wednesday also strongly urged Russians to get the shots, saying: “It’s a matter of your life and health and the health of your dear ones. “There are only two ways to get over this period; to get sick or to receive a vaccine,” Putin said.

The Russian leader, who received the domestic Sputnik V vaccine earlier this year, said he is puzzled to see hesitancy about vaccines, even among his close friends. “I can’t understand what’s going on,” Putin said. “We have a reliable and efficient vaccine. The vaccine really reduces the risks of illness, grave complications and death.”

Even though Russia, in August 2020, became the first country of the world to authorise a coronavirus vaccine and vaccines are plentiful, Russians have shown hesitancy about getting the shots, a scepticism blamed on conflicting signals sent by authorities.

While extolling Sputnik V and three other domestic vaccines, state-controlled media were often critical of Western-made shots, a controversial message that many saw as feeding public doubts about vaccines in general.

Until now, the Kremlin has ruled out a new nationwide lockdown like the one early on in the pandemic that dealt a heavy blow to the economy and sapped Putin’s popularity, empowering regional authorities across the country’s 11 time zones to decide on local restrictions, depending on their situation.

Deputy Prime Minister Tatyana Golikova, who leads the government coronavirus task force, said on Wednesday that the non-working week will imply restrictions on access to restaurants, cafes, theatres, cinemas, gyms and other facilities, adding that authorities in each region will be expected to take relevant decisions.

The Cabinet has drafted compensatory measures to help absorb the shock for the business, including one-time payments equivalent to a minimum monthly pay per worker and low-interest credits.

Many of Russia’s 85 regions already have restricted attendance at large public events and limited access to theatres, restaurants and other venues. Some have made vaccinations compulsory for certain public servants and people more than 60.

In some regions, mounting infections forced authorities to suspend medical assistance to the population as healthcare facilities were forced to focus on treating coronavirus patients.

In Moscow, however, life has continued as usual, with restaurants and movie theatres brimming with people, crowds swarming nightclubs and karaoke bars and commuters widely ignoring mask mandates on public transportation, even as intensive care units have filled in recent weeks.

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