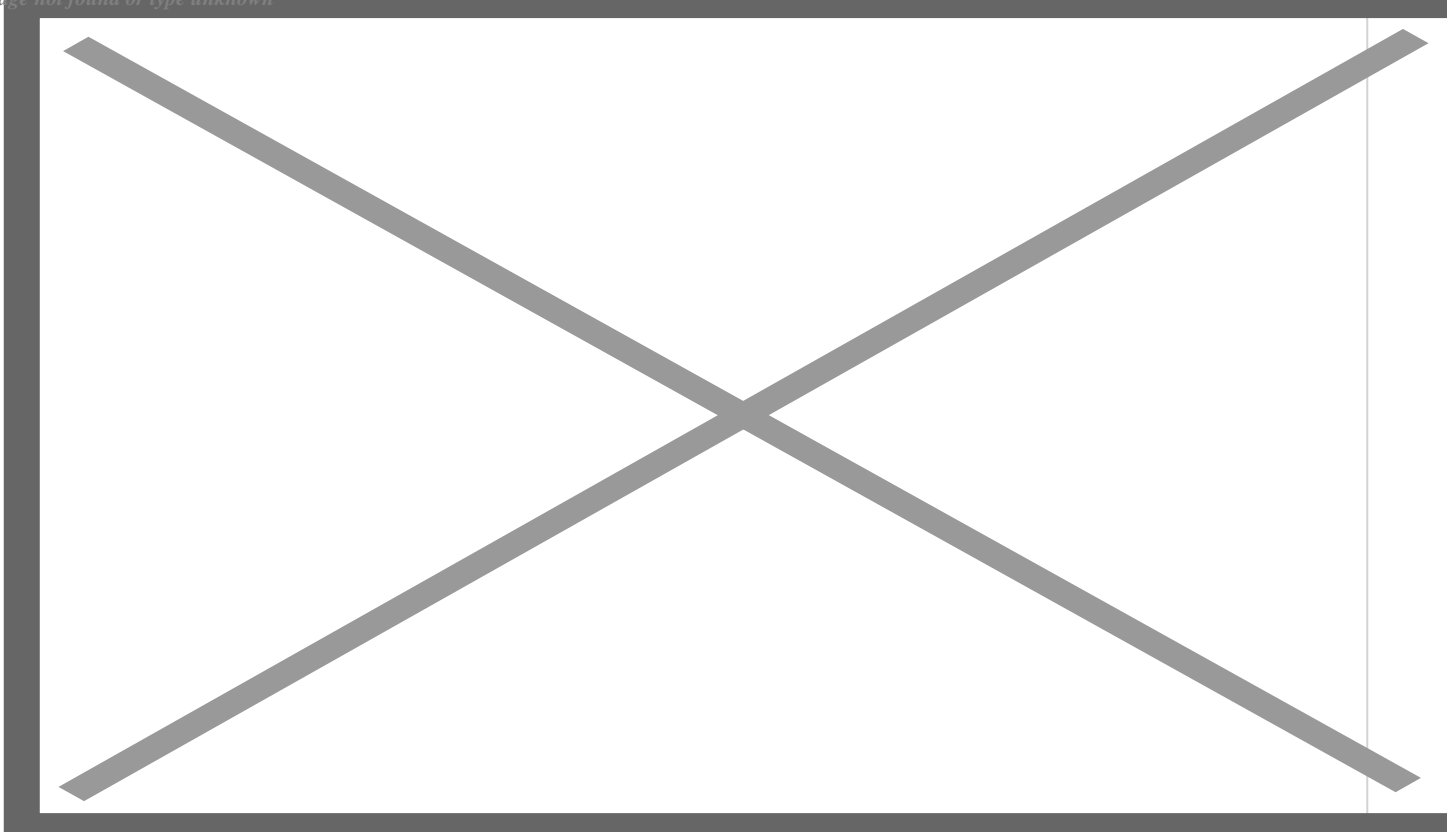


COVID outbreak at Antarctic base prompts evacuation

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FILE PHOTO. The Argentinian scientific station Esperanza. ©BDphoto via Getty Images

Buenos Aires, January 22 (RHC)-- Nine unvaccinated and infected members of staff have been evacuated to Buenos Aires, after over half the 43 scientists and military personnel stationed at an Antarctic facility in Hope Bay tested positive for COVID-19.

According to Patricia Ortuzar, the polar researcher who heads up the Argentinean government's department of Antarctic affairs, none of those who tested positive has symptoms. But she said that those who are unvaccinated have been evacuated as a precaution. Ortuzar told the AFP news agency that the remainder of those who are infected had been inoculated, and it was decided they should remain at the station.

The evacuated individuals had been stationed at La Esperanza since before vaccines became available in Argentina last year. They had declined to be inoculated before the end of their mission due to concerns they might develop side effects in Antarctica's extreme environment.

According to Ortuzar, the outbreak at La Esperanza began on January 12th, with the virus having likely been brought to the base by a new arrival. The most southerly continent was the last in the world to register a Covid-19 outbreak. The first cases were reported in December 2020 at Chile's General Bernardo O'Higgins Riquelme base.

Argentina has one of the biggest footprints in Antarctica, with six permanent bases and seven bases that operate only during the warm season. The permanent population of some 200 residents doubles in the summertime. Buenos Aires claims a sector of Antarctica as its national territory, but other countries don't recognize it.

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