

International

Russia buries latest priest to die from coronavirus

Russia records 198,676 cases and 1,827 deaths

MOSCOW: Father Andrei Molchanov, the latest Russian Orthodox priest to die from the novel coronavirus, was buried on Saturday by his heartbroken daughter who said she wished the Moscow church where he served had closed earlier. Patriarch Kirill, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, called in late March for believers to pray at home.

However tough government lockdown measures at the end of that month, which closed down restaurants and most stores, and told people to stay at home, did not order churches to shut. "I believe above all else that we should have closed churches, along with restaurants and other places," Anastasia Molchanova, the late priest's daughter, told Reuters after his burial.

Despite the patriarch's call, most churches in Moscow, including Molchanov's, remained open

until mid-April before Russia's consumer health watchdog, a government agency, issued an order to



At least 11 other Russian clerics have died

shut them. The consumer health watchdog and the Russian Orthodox Church did not immediately respond to requests for comment. At least 11 other

Russian clerics in addition to Molchanov have died since the start of the outbreak, according to a list published by "Orthodoxy and the World", an online media outlet that focuses on religious and social issues.

Most of them served in churches in the capital Moscow, which accounts for more than a half of Russia's 198,676 cases and 1,827 deaths, and the wider Moscow region. Many more clerics have been infected with the virus, Russian media have reported. Father Molchanov fell sick shortly after an Easter service, which he conducted in an empty church to broadcast it online. He later tested positive for the novel coronavirus.

The 54-year-old deacon died on May 3 in Moscow's main hospital for treating coronavirus patients. Molchanov's wife later developed pneumonia and several other members of the clergy in

the same church, including a senior priest, came down with symptoms of the virus, his daughter said. Molchanov's body was taken on Saturday from a morgue back to the Church of Saints Zosima and Savvatiy in eastern Moscow, where he served and may have been infected. His memorial service was carried out by a priest wearing a medical mask outside the church, which was closed. The gravediggers who buried him wore protective suits.

More than 20 parishioners, some of them in tears, watched the service from a distance and lit candles in front of a portrait of the priest. Molchanov's daughter said she was now taking care of her sick mother but that the only thing she could do was to bring groceries to her door. "That's the hardest thing. Everybody is quarantined. There is nobody to give a hug. I cannot even go to hug my mum." — Reuters

Russians mark Victory Day on lockdown

MOSCOW: President Vladimir Putin told Russians they are "invincible" when they stand together as the country on Saturday marked the 75th anniversary of the end of World War II in lockdown from the coronavirus. With cases surging and authorities urging Russians to stay in their homes, celebrations of this year's Victory Day were muted after the Kremlin grudgingly postponed plans for a grand parade with world leaders.

Instead of columns of military hardware and thousands of troops marching through Red Square as planned, Putin walked alone to lay flowers at the Eternal Flame outside the red brick walls of the Kremlin. In a solemn televised speech, he made no mention of the virus, despite Russia having the fifth-highest number of confirmed infections in the world. Putin instead highlighted the sacrifices made by the Soviet Union in what Russians call the Great Patriotic War and hinted at the threat now facing the country.

"Our veterans fought for life, against death. And we will always be equal to their unity and endurance," Putin said. "We know and firmly believe that we are invincible when we stand together." An honor guard marched past Putin after his speech, as Russian television showed images of Red Square empty under cloudy skies. Military helicopters, bombers and fighter jets flew over the city, releasing smoke in the red, white and blue of the Russian flag. State television counted down a minute of silence later in the evening, to commemorate the millions who perished in the war.

Surge in virus cases

The pandemic hit Russia later than western Europe but the country has seen a major increase in cases, with more than 10,000 new infections registered every day this week. On Saturday officials said the number of confirmed infections had risen by another 10,817 to reach a total of 198,676, putting Russia behind only the United States, Spain, Italy and Britain in total cases. Russia says the increase is due in part to a huge testing campaign, with more than 5.2 million tests carried out so far. The country's reported mortality rate is much lower than in many countries, with 1,827 dead from the coronavirus as of Saturday.

Critics have cast doubt on the numbers and accused authorities of under-reporting deaths. The pandemic has been a major blow to Putin's political plans for this spring. The postponed Victory Day parade, which was due to be attended by world leaders including China's Xi Jinping and Emmanuel Macron of France, had been meant as a showcase of Russia's increased global prestige under Putin. He was also forced to postpone a vote last month on constitutional reforms that would have paved his way, after being in power for more than 20 years, to potentially stay in the Kremlin until 2036.

Officials are hoping both events can still be held in 2020 and Putin said Saturday that Victory Day celebrations would take place this year "properly and on a grand scale." But no dates have been set and much will depend on when the outbreak comes under control. As with others around the world, Russians are deeply worried about the long-term economic impact of the pandemic and polls show many are increasingly frustrated with the government's handling of the crisis. One survey by independent pollster Levada this week showed Putin's approval rating falling to a historic low of 59 percent in April. — AFP



MOSCOW: Russian President Vladimir Putin looks at military aircraft flying over the Kremlin and Red Square on Saturday to mark the 75th anniversary of the victory over Nazi Germany in World War Two. — AFP

Defiant Belarus stages Victory Day parade

MINSK: Thousands of soldiers marched in Belarus on Saturday to celebrate the Soviet victory in World War Two, as President Alexander Lukashenko rejected calls for lockdown measures to fight the coronavirus pandemic. Lukashenko, who has ruled the eastern European country since 1994, has called fears over the coronavirus a "psychosis" and variously suggested drinking vodka, visiting saunas or playing ice hockey to beat the disease.

Spectators in stands in the capital Minsk, a few of whom wore masks, looked on as soldiers marched, tanks rolled past and Su-30 fighter jets flew in formation overhead. Lukashenko's insistence on going ahead with the display contrasted with neighbour Russia, which scaled back celebrations amid a jump in coronavirus cases and postponed its usual massive military parade on Red Square. Dressed in military uniform and surrounded by generals, Lukashenko said it was unacceptable for Belarus to even think about cancelling the parade.

"There will be people who will condemn us," Lukashenko said. He told such critics: "do not rush to draw conclusions, let alone condemn us, the heirs of the Victory, the Belarusians ... We simply could not ??t differently, we had no other choice." Belarus



MINSK: Belarus' Yakovlev Yak-130 aircraft takes part in a military parade on Saturday to mark the 75th anniversary of the Soviet Union's victory over Nazi Germany in World War Two. — AFP

has not imposed lockdown measures or social distancing rules, and kept its borders open while countries around the world have closed them. "This is a demonstration of determination, will, strength, not so much for society as for the inner circle of the elite," said Andrey Egorov, senior analyst at the Center for European Transformation. "It's a demonstration that everything remains under control."

Another reason for staging the parade could be an act of one-upmanship against Russian President Vladimir Putin. Ties between the two traditional allies have been strained, especially over Moscow's decision to scale back subsidies and loans that prop up Lukashenko's rule. "Against the background of

Putin's cancelled parade, Lukashenko has the opportunity to draw attention to himself," said political analyst Alexander Klaskovsky.

"This is such a kind of revenge for the numerous humiliations. Putin hid in the bunker, and Lukashenko at that time will be standing on the podium in a beautiful uniform." The World Organization has called on Belarus to introduce tougher measures to fight the coronavirus and the head of its Minsk office has expressed concern about holding the parade. There are 21,107 confirmed coronavirus cases in Belarus, with 121 deaths. But some in the country believe the official statistics underestimate the true toll. — Reuters



GORING, United Kingdom: Mannequins with wigs are pictured looking out of the window of a hairdresser's salon, closed-down due to COVID-19, west of London on Saturday. — AFP

Britain mulls quarantine for visitors

LONDON: Britain could introduce a 14-day mandatory quarantine for international arrivals to stem the spread of coronavirus, an airline association said, sparking alarm in an industry already hard hit by the global pandemic. Tim Alderslade, chief executive of Airlines UK, the trade body for UK-registered airlines, confirmed to AFP that the government had approached it with the idea.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson could unveil the measure in the evening, media reports said, when he sets out his roadmap for easing a nationwide lockdown imposed in late March to slow the spread of COVID-19. He has already said he will proceed with "maximum caution" to avoid exacerbating the outbreak in Britain, the worst hit country in Europe with 31,587 confirmed coronavirus deaths.

No major changes to the stay-at-home rules are expected next week, although garden centres are expected to reopen on Wednesday. The quarantine measures were first reported in The Times newspaper, which said that anyone coming into Britain by plane, train or boat will be required to self-isolate for a fortnight from early June. Visitors from neighboring Ireland would be exempt, it said, as would lorry drivers bringing in crucial supplies - but the measure would include British nationals returning from abroad.

The rule would be enforced through spot-checks on the address given by travellers, with possible penalties including fines of up to £1,000 (\$1,200, 1,100 euros) or deportation, The Times said. The

aviation industry, which is already teetering on the brink after planes were grounded across the globe at the start of the virus outbreak, called for urgent clarity on the plans. Airlines UK had previously warned a quarantine would "effectively kill international travel to and from the UK", making it "all but impossible for aviation to resume any time soon".

In a statement on Saturday, Alderslade said the group needed to see more details of the plan and would be asking for assurances the decision was "led by the science" and would be regularly reviewed. "We also need to see a number of new support measures to see airlines through this period so that we still have a UK aviation sector once the quarantine period is lifted," he added. Derek Provan, chief executive of AGS Airports, which owns and operates several regional British airports, also expressed alarm.

"This measure will have a devastating effect on aviation, tourism and hospitality as inbound visitors will not come to the UK whilst this is in place," he said. The government declined to comment on the plans on Saturday, but Johnson's spokesman on Friday had confirmed the idea was under "active" consideration. At the start of the global outbreak, Britain asked visitors from hotspots such as the Chinese city of Wuhan and northern Italy to self-isolate on arrival. But it refused to follow other countries in shutting its borders, saying coronavirus was already in Britain. If infection rates fall enough to start lifting the lockdown, officials say that putting foreign visitors into quarantine might help stop a new surge. Separately, Transport Secretary Grant Shapps announced plans to increase and improve cycle routes and widen pavements across England in the coming weeks, to boost cycling and walking. He warned that when the lockdown is eased, continued social distancing measures mean the public transport network will only be able to cope with one tenth of pre-outbreak passengers. — AFP

Flowers via a stranger: Chileans compromise on cemetery visits

SANTIAGO: Every year for the past 20, Rosa Maria Fuenzalida has visited her mother's grave on Mother's Day without fail in the central Chilean city of Curico. She is one of millions of people in Latin America, where family is its own religion, who flock to take floral offerings to the cemeteries where their mothers and grandmothers are buried to show they are not forgotten. This year though, with Chileans self-isolating as the new coronavirus spreads around the country, Rosa Maria relied on a stranger to take flowers to her mother's grave.

Burial places throughout Chile announced widespread dismay that they would not open on Mother's Day. But Curico's general cemetery, which ordinarily would have 15,000 visitors on Mother's Day, offered a compromise. For three days in the run-up to Sunday, it invited visitors to bring their flowers to the front gate on different days, according to the letters of their surnames, for the bouquets to be delivered for them to their loved ones' final resting place.

Those leaving bouquets said they received a Whatsapp message shortly afterward with a photograph of the flowers in place, with a note assuring them they had fresh water. Roberto Garcia, the cemetery's director, said more than 1,000 people had brought flowers by Friday afternoon. "Today in Chile the truth is that it has been hard; we have people who have died, in Curico we have more than 45 cases of coronavirus," he said. "This acts as a ray of light. We are doing this with care and love for each of these families and especially the children who have lost their mothers."

Rosa Maria, an only child who was 21 when her mother died, said she had been struck by the local authorities' recognizing the practice as "essential" amid social distancing rules across Chile. "Despite the time that has passed, I still have a relationship with my mum and to be able to go to the cemetery regularly to see her is important to me," she said. "Everything is strange at the moment, but to have someone else take care of something so personal was really strange, but also really lovely."

In the capital, Santiago, where the largest cemeteries ordinarily attract tens of thousands of visitors with associated road closures and chaotic scenes, the national federation of cemetery workers this week urged people to stay away. Luis Yevenes, its president, told a local radio station: "It's for everyone's safety. We need to stop this virus. It is sad to see the funeral corteges coming in without people, just the coffin, because the relatives cannot go amid the quarantine. We want to avoid more people going through that pain."

Around the region, where many nations are only just nearing the peak of infections from the deadly virus, Mother's Day will be a muted affair on Sunday. — Reuters