

## International

# Russian medics ask where Putin's virus bonuses went

## Overworked Russian health workers see no sign of promised sums

**MOSCOW:** Maria, a 24-year-old doctor working outside Moscow, expected to be paid extra if one of her patients tested positive for the coronavirus. Instead, her salary shrank. In a small town 200 kilometers (120 miles) from the capital, she visits patients at home and normally has around three calls a day. But that number surged to 30 in April as the pandemic struck Russia.

When President Vladimir Putin promised on TV in April that doctors would get a monthly bonus of 80,000 rubles (\$1,100) for treating virus patients, she thought it was compensation for increased risk and workload. "I hoped that if I came in contact with the infection, I would also get some extra money," said Maria, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, fearing she could damage her career prospects.

What happened was quite different. After a patient she visited and swabbed tested positive, Maria was ordered to self-isolate for two weeks. When she got her April salary, it was cut to just 14,000 rubles. Her salary varies from month to month, but the most she makes is 36,000 rubles, working two different jobs and overtime, she said.

"I could have contracted the virus, but instead of a bonus, my salary is less than usual," said Maria, who was only given one surgical mask and a pair of gloves per shift. Healthcare workers across Russia watched Putin promise doctors extra pay and monthly bonuses of between 25,000 and 80,000 rubles to medics and drivers working to fight coronavirus. But when overworked doctors opened their April pay slips, most saw no sign of these generous sums.

Many posted photos online of pay cheques where the extra money amounted to \$10 dollars or less—or nothing at all. On Wednesday, Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin acknowledged the problem.

The government has transferred 27 billion rubles for healthcare bonuses, but regional authorities have only paid out 4.5 billion, he said. "There are problems with payments even in regions most hit by the infection, where the workload on medics is at the maximum," he admitted. With more than 242,000 confirmed COVID-19 cases and cases steadily rising, Russia has the world's second-highest number of infections. Andrei Konoval, head of the Action union of medical workers, said Putin's directive lost its punch as it percolated through the healthcare system's bureaucracy. Some hospitals only added certain staff to "coronavirus teams", so when others, like Maria, faced the virus they were not eligible for the bonus.

In some regions, facilities calculated time in contact with the infection down to the minute to save money. Ambulance crews at some hospitals would only get paid extra for treating confirmed coronavirus cases. "In reality, ambulance teams going out on a call about high blood pressure risk infection even more," because they have less protection and patients do not know if they are infected, Konoval said. Putin's bonus promise had sounded "very attractive", he said, "but it has resulted in huge disappointment among doctors."

That feeling has compounded frustration in the medical community that they are taken for granted, especially after a recent cycle of



**MOSCOW:** People walk past a poster on a wall of a hospital reading in Russian "Heros - Medics" in Moscow amid the spread of the COVID-19 infection caused by the novel coronavirus. — AFP

"optimisation" reforms that closed thousands of clinics. "This looks like a cruel joke to medical workers" already used to unfulfilled promises, says a petition launched last week by the Action union, which is demanding full payouts.— AFP

## UK in talks with Roche on COVID-19 tests

**LONDON:** Britain is in talks with Swiss drugmaker Roche Holding AG on rolling out an accurate COVID-19 antibody test that it said could be a 'game changer' on getting the world's fifth largest economy back to work. The novel coronavirus, which emerged in China, has propelled the world towards the sharpest recession in centuries with many people isolating at home as governments grapple with one of the biggest health crises since the 1918 influenza epidemic.

The British government said it was talking with Roche on rolling out its test after a Public Health England laboratory at Porton Down, in Wiltshire, concluded it had 100 percent specificity. That means it can detect antibodies to the exact disease rather than similar ones.

"This has the potential to be a game changer," said Edward Argar, Britain's junior health minister.

"We are now moving as fast as we can to discuss with Roche purchasing of those but I can't give you an exact date when we'll be able to start rolling them out." The Roche test received a conformity assessment, known as Conformité Européenne, or CE mark, from the European Union on April 28 and received Emergency Use Authorization from the US Food and Drug Administration on May 2.

Before the Porton Down laboratory's results, the United Kingdom had said no COVID-19 antibody test was accurate enough to use. "This is a very positive development because such a highly specific anti-body test is a very reliable marker of past infection," said John Newton, national coordinator of the UK Coronavirus Testing Program.

"Scientific experts at PHE Porton Down carried out an independent evaluation of the new Roche SARS-CoV-2 serology assay in record time, concluding that it is a highly specific assay with specificity of 100 percent."



### Blood test

Roche said late on Wednesday it was in talks with the National Health Service and the UK government about a phased roll-out of antibody test kits as soon as possible and would be able to provide hundreds of thousands of the test kits per week. "The test requires a blood sample to be taken by a qualified healthcare professional and processed in a laboratory," Roche said, adding that it was one of the most accurate tests on the market with over 99.8 specificity.

"This level of accuracy is vitally important because there are a number of viruses with very similar antibodies to Covid-19, including the common cold, and other SARS strains, which can produce a positive result in some less accurate antibody tests."

The Telegraph, which first reported the findings, said the government was in negotiations with Roche to buy millions of kits. Similar antibody tests have also been developed by companies including U.S.-based Abbott Laboratories and Italy's DiaSorin.

Unlike tests to diagnose diseases, antibody tests show who has been infected, although it is not yet clear whether that confers permanent immunity. — Reuters

## 12 'terrorism' suspects dead in Burkina prison

**OUAGADOUGOU, Burkina Faso:** Twelve people detained on suspicion of terrorism were found dead in their police cells in west of Burkina Faso, the local prosecutor said on Wednesday. The prosecutor for the town of Fada N'Gourma said in a statement that 25 people had been detained overnight Monday and "unfortunately, 12 of them have died during the course of the night in the cells they were being held in." An investigation has been launched and officers of the judicial police are at the scene as well as health officials, the statement said. Security sources contacted by AFP said that "only the investigation can determine the cause" of the deaths, but one possible explanation was asphyxiation. Independent sources told AFP that most of those detained were ethnic Fula, who are regularly accused of having links with jihadist groups.

In July 2019, 11 people suspected of drug trafficking were found dead in a single cell while in custody of the national police's drugs squad. In that case, the heads of the squad were relieved of their duties and an investigation was launched.

Burkina Faso's security forces have regularly been accused of mistreating Fula people. On May 2, a Fula teacher was found dead in a police station in Ouagadougou, according to the Burkinabe human rights organisation, MBDHP.

Suspected of having links with terrorist groups, he had been arrested on April 23 in Absouya in the west of the country. Between December and January, at least four people, all Fula, were "victims of forced disappearances" in Ouagadougou, MBDHP said.

The Burkinabe army, as well as vigilante groups have also been accused of killing Fula civilians in the north and east of the country in the wake of jihadist violence. — AFP