

# ARMENIA BRAVES CORONAVIRUS BETTER THAN MOST

*Posted on March 21, 2020 by Keghart*



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**Special Report by Karen Mkrtchyan, Yerevan 27 March 2020**

The coronavirus threat became a cause of serious concern for Armenia after the first case was reported in neighboring Iran. On Feb. 19, Iranian officials announced that two people had died of the virus in the country.

The Government came under pressure from opposition parties and civil society to close the border with Iran, which it did on Feb. 25 with both sides agreeing to suspend flights and close the land border for at least two weeks.

While this would prevent the entry of travelers into the country, it would not prevent the return of citizens of Armenia. Calls for a mandatory 14-day quarantine for returning citizens, even without initial symptoms, were dismissed by the authorities, a mistake that would eventually see the first case reported on March 1. The victim had returned from Iran.

The news prompted Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan to declare a two-week shutdown of all educational institutions, including schools, kindergartens and colleges. The second confirmed case in Armenia was reported on March 9, this time the victim was a woman who had recently returned from Italy. Like the first victim, she had not been kept under a mandatory 14-day quarantine.

On March 14, the borders between Armenia and Georgia were shut to travelers. With Turkish and Azeri borders already closed, shutting the borders with Iran and Georgia put the country in potential self-isolation.

The swift action of the Armenian authorities to identify the circle of direct interaction of all the confirmed cases is commendable. With reports of mistreatment of suspected patients flowing in from various countries, Armenia caught the headlines when it quarantined the first batch of 32 people in a 5-star hotel in the resort town of Tsaghkadzor.

It also put the city of Echmiadzin, where the majority of the initial victims were reported, under constant watch. Echmiadzin exit and entry points, except for three, were put under strict supervision: doctors checked the temperature of commuters before allowing them to leave the city.

Such actions helped contain the spread of the virus. Almost all newly-identified cases that followed came from among those already put under isolation by the Government. The Nork Infection Clinic Hospital in Yerevan was modified to serve as the primary treatment centre for the victims.

To ensure the safety of citizens, the government declared a state of emergency on March 16, prompting Parliament to pass, unanimously, a package of draft laws proposing amendments to the Criminal Code and Administrative Offences Code, envisaging high fines and even jail terms for those ignoring the self-isolation laws during the emergency. The law also banned the publication of provocative information.

Stepping up its efforts to contain the spread of coronavirus, the government declared a nationwide

lockdown with all businesses and entertainment centres shutting down, except for supermarkets, vegetable markets, bakeries, pharmacies, etc. Citizens stepping out of their house are expected to carry an identification card, along with a filled-out form containing information about their address, their time of leaving and return, the reason for going out, etc. No more than two people are allowed to travel in the same vehicle. With police patrolling the streets, those caught violating the lockdown orders are handed steep fines.

With the Coronavirus spreading havoc globally, Armenia's response is worth emulating.

In a display of unity, over 2,000 volunteers registered to work with the authorities to help seniors confined at home. Upon the initiative of the Government and individuals, companies and organizations, food distribution and charity activities were organized to ensure no citizen feels alone. A two-hour window, between 10 am to 12 noon, was declared as exclusively seniors' shopping time.

A special bank account opened by the authorities received over \$1-million in large and small donations, with many individuals coming forward to stitch and distribute face masks for free at a time of shortages. The medical community has selflessly worked 24/7 battling the epidemic and over 900 people have been kept in isolation in different parts of the country. Ambulance workers and helpline attendees have worked tirelessly while over 2,000 citizens are in self-isolation. With certain medical professionals infected, the attention of the country has focused on them and their services.

While panic-shopping and hoarding were common even in the most developed countries, no such behavior was reported in Armenia. No supermarket was reported to have run out of essential items.

Compared to the most developed countries, Armenia has done remarkably well in preventing the coronavirus from spreading. As of March 27, Armenia reported 329 cases, of which 28 had been cured and one patient passed away. The deceased was 72-year-old with a number of ailments, including double pneumonia, multiple organ failure, respiratory distress syndrome, etc.

With few patients in critical condition, Armenia has no shortages of ventilators, although the government has received donations from contributors. Here is how Armenia compares with its neighbors, as well as some of the major world economies. Please note that these numbers are as accurate as reported by the authorities.

Country	Number of Cases	Deaths	Recovered	Active
Armenia	329	1	28	300
Georgia	83	0	14	69
Turkey	5,698	92	42	5564
Iran	32,332	2,378	11,133	18,821
Azerbaijan	165	3	15	147

Russia	1,036	4	45	987
USA	104,126	1,695	2,522	99,908
Germany	50,871	351	6,658	43,862
France	32,964	1,995	5,700	25,269
Italy	86,498	9,134	10,950	66,414
Spain	65,719	5,139	9,357	51,224
China	81,340	3,292	74,588	3,460
S. Korea	3,332	139	4,528	4,665

As indicated by the above list, Georgia is the only country that has outperformed Armenia along, with Azerbaijan, if the truthfulness of the numbers presented by the latter can be trusted.

According to the Health Ministry of Armenia, the majority of the registered patients do not display symptoms such as fever or cough and are not taking medication.

Other than Yerevan, cases of Coronavirus have been reported in all regions of Armenia except the Tavush, Gegarkunik, and Vayots Dzor regions. Artsakh, which goes to the polls on March 31, has not reported Coronavirus cases. However, considering the high number of international observers as well as observers from Armenia involved in the election, there's the risk that the virus might spread there if the authorities do not call off the election as Armenia did re the referendum which was scheduled for April 5.

With the economy badly affected, the Government has come up with unprecedented support projects to help businesses obtain interest-free loans to sustain themselves during the financial crisis. Individuals with bank loans and other lending organizations have also been offered the opportunity to postpone the payment of their monthly installments. Considering that many citizens will not receive paychecks at the end of the month or will receive them in part since workplaces are shut, monthly utility payments will be postponed for people who are unable to pay on time.

With a shutdown of the country and barring a few initial mistakes by the authorities, the overall actions taken by the Government have been impressive and commendable. The close cooperation between the government, opposition parties, health services, and the police have helped to contain the spread of the virus. Armenian citizens have also shown discipline and exercised restraint, venturing out only when necessary.

Armenia's handling of the pandemic will be highlighted when down the road analysis is made of the world's response to the Covid-19.

**There are no comments yet.**