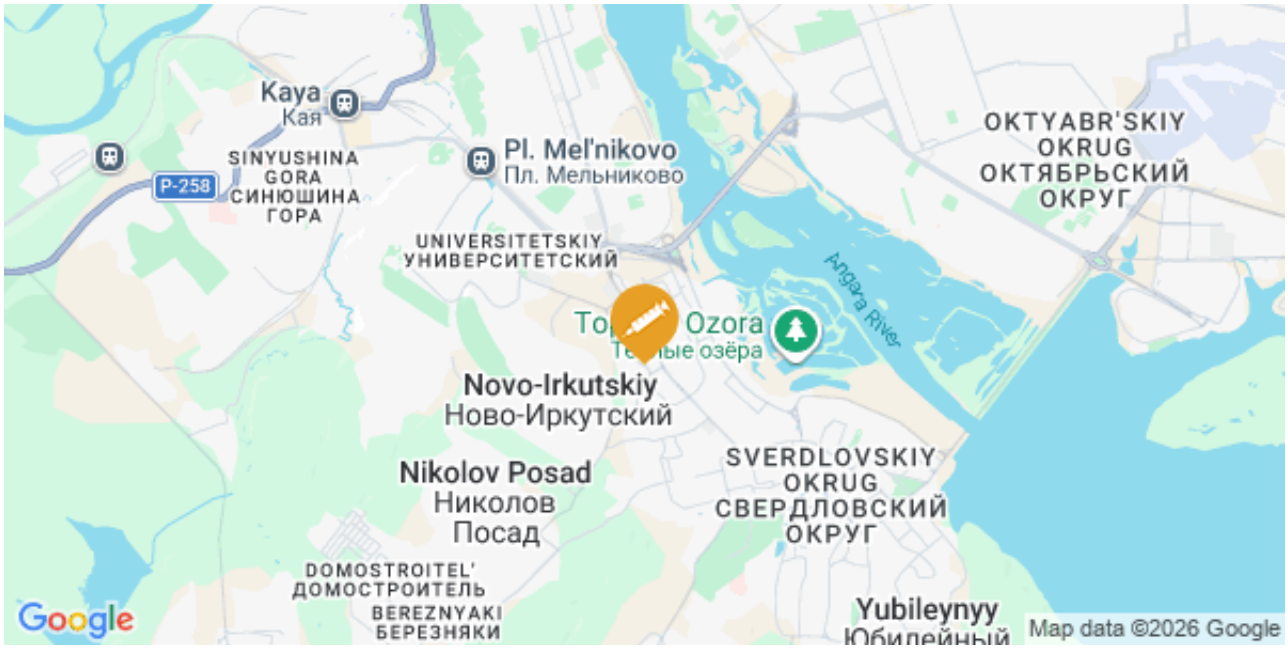
Health



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Russia Alert: US Embassy issues alert for suspected plague in Irkutsk on October 6; limited transparency, controlled media to exacerbate concerns over severity of incident

Current Situation

- On October 6, the US Embassy in Moscow issued a health alert concerning reports about the suspected pneumonic plague in the Irkutsk region.
- The alert states that US authorities are tracking the situation and have advised US citizens in Russia to follow the guidance of local health authorities, avoid affected facilities, and seek medical care promptly if they develop fever or respiratory symptoms. Further details about the advisory and future updates can be found here.
- This follows the October 2 death of Darya Shipilova, a laboratory worker at the Irkutsk Anti-Plague Research Institute in Siberia, after she developed severe pneumonia. Russian media reported an unverified claim that Shipilova may have been exposed to pneumonic-plague bacteria after accidentally breaking a test tube at the institute. Russian authorities have denied that a laboratory accident involving pathogenic microorganisms occurred.
- Russia has not reported any confirmed plague cases in Irkutsk. However, reports indicate that approximately 200 contacts were placed under medical observation following the incident, while restrictions were imposed at some medical facilities in the region as a precaution.

Source: US Embassy

Assessments & Forecast

1. The limited transparency and controlled media environment in Russia are likely to continue exacerbating concerns over the gravity of the situation by making it difficult to establish the full scale and circumstances of the incident. While Russian authorities have stated that no plague cases or laboratory accidents have been identified, they have provided limited public explanation for the monitoring of approximately 200 contacts and restrictions at medical facilities. The continued absence of clear information is likely to allow competing accounts of Shipilova's illness and death to persist, increasing uncertainty over the severity of the situation and raising the possibility that further cases or precautionary measures may not be immediately reflected in public reporting.
2. As a result, the available information is insufficient to determine with confidence whether the incident remains limited to an isolated case or reflects a broader health concern. The scale of the precautionary response indicates that authorities have treated the incident seriously, although this does not in itself indicate that additional cases have been identified. This is consistent with WHO's initial risk assessment, which places the risk at moderate to low for Irkutsk, low for Russia as a whole, and very low for the WHO European region. However, confirmation of additional cases, particularly among those already under observation, would indicate a higher level of risk than currently assessed and could prompt expanded health measures.
3. **FORECAST:** Elevated precautionary measures at health facilities in Irkutsk and Shelekhov are likely to continue in the immediate term, potentially including medical monitoring, temporary quarantine or isolation measures, mask requirements, use of protective equipment and enhanced sanitation protocols. Healthcare disruptions are also likely to persist, with patients and staff potentially facing restricted access to affected facilities and additional health checks. Local movement could be affected if further cases are identified, particularly around affected healthcare facilities in Irkutsk and Shelekhov. However, the risk of significant restrictions on travel and/or wider disruptions across Russia, including in Moscow and St. Petersburg, remains low as of writing.
4. **FORECAST:** While the immediate impact on international travel is expected to remain low, this could change if additional cases are identified, particularly outside the existing contact network. In such a scenario, the responses of neighboring Central Asian countries are likely to serve as indicators of a potential increase in regional travel restrictions. The precautionary measures already introduced by Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan indicate that authorities are prepared to strengthen border health controls if the situation deteriorates.
5. Additionally, while these developments have raised concerns among some US lawmakers and former officials regarding Russia's potential use of plague for biological warfare, there is currently no publicly available evidence that the incident involved an offensive biological-weapons programme or a deliberate release of plague. The likelihood of the incident being assessed as a deliberate biological-weapons attack remains low, given the absence of evidence indicating deliberate release, sabotage, unauthorized access or links between the incident and an offensive biological-weapons programme at the Irkutsk laboratory. However, the incident is likely to increase scrutiny of Russian biological research facilities in the near to medium term.

Recommendations

1. Avoid nonessential travel to Russia due to potential instability in the coming days, the underlying threat of military mobilization, arbitrary detention, and increased risk of spillover violence in regions bordering Ukraine.
2. Organizations operating in or with personnel in Irkutsk and Shelekhov should maintain awareness of official health updates and monitor any changes to local hospital restrictions, contact-monitoring measures, movement controls, or border-screening requirements.

3. Personnel in the affected area should avoid nonessential visits to affected healthcare facilities and identify alternative medical providers in advance in case access to local facilities becomes restricted.
4. Monitor changes to border screening, quarantine requirements and entry controls in neighboring countries for indications of a broader regional response to the outbreak.