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Homeless hard hit in Eastern Europe cold spell

KIEV, Ukraine: Dozens of homeless people have died in an Eastern Europe cold snap, and some analysts blame a Soviet-era legacy of viewing the homeless as those who need to be punished instead of helped.

Temperatures have plunged to minus 27 C (minus 17 F) in some areas. At least 58 people have died overall in the past week, while hundreds have sought medical help for hypothermia and frostbite. Snow and ice have disrupted traffic and power in some parts.

Ukraine has been among the hardest hit countries. As many as 30 people have died on its snow-covered streets, in hospitals and in their own homes in the past four days. Authorities said most of the victims were homeless, and that some victims had been drinking and unaware of the danger.

In one village in the Cherkasy region in central Ukraine, a 44-year-old alcoholic fell asleep on the porch of her house and froze to death, said Olena Didyuk, spokeswoman for the Emergency Situations Ministry.

Ukrainian authorities have set up hundreds of ‘heating centers’ across the country — large green or beige tents — in which the homeless can get warm and are offered sandwiches, boiled potatoes, pork fat (a traditional Ukrainian dish), hot tea and coffee.

Still, more than 540 people have been hospitalized with hypothermia and frostbite, Ukrainian health officials said. Ukraine’s 1+1 channel broadcast footage of a man being treated for frostbite in his toes, which had turned completely black.

“I drank and fell asleep on the bench. I woke up in the middle of the night and couldn’t feel my feet,” the unidentified man said from a hospital bed.

Hospitals were instructed to refrain from discharging homeless patients even if treatment was finished to save them from the cold, said Svitlana Tikhonenko, spokeswoman for the Health Ministry.

Those measures helped save some lives, she said. Two years ago, 47 people perished over a similar time period during a cold wave.

“Unfortunately, people continue to die, but we are taking all the measures to prevent them,” Tikhonenko said.

Some experts suggested that the high death toll from the cold is linked to authorities’ unwillingness and incompetence in dealing with the homeless.

Pavlo Rozenko, an expert on social policy with the Kiev-based Razumkov Center, said that Ukrainian authorities suffer from the Soviet legacy of viewing the homeless as alcoholics, drug addicts and do-nothings who need to be punished and locked away from society instead of helped.

“The country doesn’t know yet how to take care of its homeless,” Rozenko said.

Kiev municipal head Oleksandr Popov ordered city schools and colleges closed starting Wednesday as temperatures are expected to drop to minus 28 C (minus 18 F). “They will be on a break at least until Monday,” Popov said on his website.

In Poland, five people died of hypothermia in the last 24 hours, bringing the death toll from the cold to 15 in the last four days, the national police said.

Temperatures sank Tuesday to minus 27 C (minus 17 F) in the southeastern Polish city of Ustrzyki Gorne — and forecasts predicted minus 29 C (minus 20 F) in the region overnight.

In Romania, two people died in the past 24 hours due to the frigid weather, the health ministry said Tuesday, bringing the total to eight since the cold spell began last week. Temperatures plunged to minus 20 C (minus 4 F) overnight in Bucharest.

In Russia, one person died of the cold in Moscow, where temperatures fell to minus 21 C (minus 6 F), the city's health department said. The Russian Emergencies Ministry is not reporting deaths across the country yet.