

360° in the Village of Balanci and in Debar Just Before the Declaration of the State of Emergency

Only ambulances may exit Debar and Centar Zhupa without being checked at the police checkpoints. The van that was recorded by the camera of '360°' was transporting a person infected with Coronavirus to Skopje.

Any other vehicles and passengers are checked for their identity first. There is no exit for the 'common' people, and entry is permitted only to the residents of the two municipalities who happened to be out of their homes before the quarantine.

The police officers at the checkpoint are equipped with protective masks and gloves and are supported by the special force unit members. There is no mixing of the local population, not even in terms of the mobile toilets.

Just before the respective measures were imposed, our team visited Debar and Balanci, the village of the spouses infected with the Coronavirus.

The last day, less than 24 hours before the quarantine, the streets in the village of Balanci were almost deserted. This is the village of the first infected persons with the Coronavirus in Macedonia – an elderly married couple that returned from Italy and then transmitted the disease to their relatives and close friends and neighbors.

According to the latest census, the number of residents in the village is 432, and most of them are economic migrants which may be noticed from the number plates on some of the cars.

We encountered the first resident somewhere in the middle of the village. He is a shopkeeper. His name is Isen Iseni, and he is a relative of the initial infected persons. He is at his workplace wearing protective equipment and he told us that he had not had any contact with the infected couple.

'People are afraid that maybe somebody else was in contact with them, but according to the information we received they did not meet many people. I have not seen them yet and they have not been out since we heard the news', told us Mr. Iseni, the shopkeeper from the village of Balanci.

As opposed to the bigger places, people have not been shopping frantically here.

'The situation remains the same; people do not seem to be panicking. My shop can meet the family needs in the village', said Mr. Iseni, the shopkeeper from the village of Balanci.

Nevertheless, while touring the village, we came across some people who were not as cautious as Mr. Iseni.

'We are in nature.'

'Aren't you afraid of the latest Coronavirus cases?'

'Nobody comes here with us. We do our jobs and go back home. Some people are afraid, but some others are not concerned at all. The nature here is good, just like everything else here', stated a resident of the village of Balanci.

These two laborers were not the only ones doing their routine works as if there was no threat to the public health in the village. At the exit of Balanci, a larger group of laborers were doing some construction work in one of the village houses. They refused to speak in front of the camera.

We set off for Debar, the town with the highest number of infected people with COVID-19. At the entrance of the municipal building, there were disinfectants, and inside there was a team disinfecting the premises.

One day before the quarantine, the Mayor Hekuran Duka himself requested that the town was closed and entry into and exit from the town was banned.

'Debar is to be quarantined and this would be a very good measure for our town since the spreading of the virus would be put under control', stated the Mayor of Debar, Mr. Hekuran Duka.

Caution was noticeable in the case of the citizens. Many of them were wearing masks and gloves. Even the local Islamic Religious Community banned any religious rites in mosques, but, yet, there were some bypassing and violating the recommendations.

'I was at the mosque and there was no hoxha in the mosque. We went at our own discretion, and there were six of us. In any case, when people are ill, they simply do not go to the mosque', said a citizen of Debar.

'Are you feeling well?'

'I do not have any problems', said the citizen of Debar.

'I am not afraid, nobody in my family is ill. It is true that Debar is the most impacted town, but the affected persons have been taken to Skopje. You can put a mask on or anything else, but it is up to Allah, everything is in his hands'.

There were people at the local barber shop as well, but the barber has undertaken all necessary measures so as to protect himself.'

'We are to protect ourselves by washing our hands and by wearing masks', said the barber from Debar.

'Do the citizens of Debar abide by these measures?'

'At the beginning, they wouldn't, but now they have started to respect them. Now it is the right time to show our citizens' obedience and get isolated in the case of onset of symptoms', said the barber from Debar.

Some of the staff from the hospital in Debar were already in self-isolation. These were the medical personnel that had the initial contact with the married couple from Balanci before they were diagnosed with COVID-19.

'Following the recommendations of the epidemiologist, we have decided that the doctors that had the initial contact and the medical personnel and nurses were isolated for a period of 2 weeks. For the time being, the number of isolated doctors is 6 and the number of isolated nurses staying at home is 8, including one radiologist and one laboratory operator', stated the Director of the hospital in Debar.

This region shall remain quarantined by the end of April at the earliest. If the situation further deteriorates, it is likely that the police checkpoints shall remain for a longer period of time.