Russia-linked disinformation campaign fueling coronavirus alarm, US says

Arthur MACMILLAN, Shaun TANDON, AFP - February 22, 2020

Washington (AFP) - Thousands of Russian-linked social media accounts have launched a coordinated effort to spread alarm about the new coronavirus, disrupting global efforts to fight the epidemic, US officials say.

The disinformation campaign promotes unfounded conspiracy theories that the United States is behind the COVID-19 outbreak, in an apparent bid to damage the US image around the world by seizing on health concerns.

State Department officials tasked with combating Russian disinformation told AFP that false personas are being used on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram to advance Russian talking points in multiple languages.

"Russia's intent is to sow discord and undermine US institutions and alliances from within, including through covert and coercive malign influence campaigns," said Philip Reeker, the acting Assistant Secretary of State for Europe and Eurasia.

"By spreading disinformation about coronavirus, Russian malign actors are once again choosing to threaten public safety by distracting from the global health response," he said.

The claims that have been circulating in recent weeks include allegations that the virus is a US effort to "wage economic war on China," that it is a biological weapon manufactured by the CIA or part of a Western-led effort "to push anti-China messages."

US individuals including Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates, a philanthropist who has spent billions on global health programs, have also been falsely accused of involvement in the virus.
The disinformation campaign was identified by US monitors in mid-January after Chinese officials announced a third death from the new coronavirus in Wuhan, the epicenter of the outbreak.

More than 2,340 people have since died, mostly in China. The number of cases exceeds 76,000 and the virus has reached around 25 countries. Among them is Iran, which on Saturday ordered the closure of schools and universities in two cities, after a fifth death.

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