vinetur

Methanol-Laced Bootleg Alcohol Causes Dozens of Deaths in Russia and Kuwait

Authorities link fatalities to illicit spirits as economic hardship and alcohol bans drive demand for dangerous homemade alternatives.

Tuesday, September 30, 2025



Authorities in Russia’s Leningrad region have arrested a local nursery teacher after at least 25 people died from drinking vodka tainted with lethal levels of methanol. The deaths occurred in September in the town of Slantsy and nearby villages, close to the Estonian border. Forensic tests confirmed that the victims, most of whom were pensioners, had consumed bootleg vodka containing high or fatal concentrations of methanol, according to the Leningrad regional prosecutor’s office.

The first fatalities were reported on September 10. The death toll rose steadily as more bodies were examined, Russian news agency TASS reported. Investigators said the victims had purchased cheap, unlabelled spirits for about 90 pence a bottle. The affected towns are economically deprived, and moonshine consumption is common due to high prices for legal alcohol.

Police detained around 14 people during the investigation and seized more than 1,300 liters of illicit alcohol—over 2,600 bottles. Three suspects face trial under Article 238 of the Russian criminal code for selling products that caused multiple deaths. Among those arrested are 78-year-old Nikolai Boytsov and 60-year-old Olga Stepanova, a kindergarten teacher. Court documents allege that Stepanova illegally bought industrial alcohol and stored it in Slantsy before supplying it to Boytsov, who then sold it locally. Searches of Boytsov’s apartment uncovered dozens of empty bottles and large canisters with traces of alcohol.

Stepanova’s husband told local media that his wife was innocent and claimed police only found old empty canisters at their home. He described her as a “decent woman” with four decades of work experience.

Major General Irina Volk, spokesperson for the Interior Ministry, said investigators traced the counterfeit vodka to a commercial firm in Trubnikov Bor in Tosnensky district. The Slantsevsky city court has ordered pre-trial detention for the main suspects while investigations continue. Prosecutors have warned residents not to buy alcohol from unknown sources and are conducting checks on local shops and warehouses.

This incident is part of a recurring problem in Russia. In August, at least ten tourists died in Sochi after drinking counterfeit grappa bought at a market. Two women have been charged in that case. In 2023, about 50 deaths were linked to counterfeit cider across Russia, and in 2016 more than 70 people died in Irkutsk after consuming bath oil containing methanol. Despite stricter regulations in recent years, counterfeit alcohol remains widely available, especially in poorer regions where many seek cheaper alternatives.

The crisis in Russia follows a similar outbreak in Kuwait just weeks earlier. In August, Kuwaiti health authorities confirmed 23 deaths and over 160 hospitalizations due to bootleg alcohol containing methanol. Hospitals in Kuwait City treated patients with symptoms such as nausea, breathing problems, and sudden vision loss. At least 51 people required emergency dialysis and 31 were placed on ventilators.

Kuwaiti police arrested 67 people and shut down ten illegal factories producing the toxic spirits. Officials said a Bangladeshi national led the operation with accomplices from South Asia. Migrant workers were among those most affected; embassies reported dozens hospitalized or dead among Indian and Nepali nationals.

Kuwait enforces a total ban on alcohol sales, which officials say has increased demand for dangerous homemade spirits. The country’s first deputy prime minister directed the crackdown and promised zero tolerance for those involved in producing or selling illicit alcohol.

Both cases highlight ongoing risks from counterfeit alcohol in regions where legal options are limited or unaffordable for many residents. Authorities continue to warn against buying unregulated spirits as investigations proceed into those responsible for the recent deaths.