

Tunisia announces three cases of coronavirus, one death

May 21 2013

A 66-year-old Tunisian man has died from the new coronavirus following a visit to Saudi Arabia and two of his adult children were infected with it, the Tunisian Health Ministry reported.

His sons were treated and have since recovered but the rest of the family remains under medical observation, the ministry said in a statement Monday. The World Health Organization confirmed the cases of the children, but said one of them was a daughter who was with her father for part of the trip to Saudi Arabia and Qatar. There was no immediate way to reconcile the differing reports.

The cases are the first for Tunisia and indicate that the virus is slowly trickling out of Saudi Arabia, where more than 30 coronavirus cases have been reported. There have been at least 20 deaths worldwide out of 40 cases.

"These Tunisia cases haven't changed our risk assessment, but they do show the virus is still infecting people," said Gregory Hartl, a spokesman for WHO in Geneva.

The Tunisian fatality, a diabetic, had been complaining of breathing problems since his return from the trip and died in a hospital in the coastal Tunisian city of Monastir. Many previous coronavirus patients have had underlying medical problems, which WHO said might have made them more susceptible to getting infected. There is no specific treatment for the disease, but the agency has issued guidelines for how

doctors might treat patients, like providing oxygen therapy and avoiding strong steroids.

The new virus has been compared to SARS, an unusual pneumonia that surfaced in China then erupted into a deadly international outbreak in early 2003. Ultimately, more than 8,000 SARS cases were reported in about 30 countries and over 770 people died from it.

The new coronavirus is most closely related to a bat virus and is part of a family of viruses that cause the common cold and SARS. Experts suspect it may be jumping directly from animals like camels or goats into people, but there isn't enough proof to narrow down a species yet. The virus can cause acute respiratory disease, kidney failure and heart problems.

"We still do not have a good idea of how people are getting infected and that is a major concern," said Hartl.

Last week, WHO said it was worried about "cases that are not part of larger clusters and who do not have a history of animal contact." WHO said those cases suggest the virus may already be spreading in the community.

The Saudi Arabian cities of Mecca and Medina will receive millions of pilgrims from around the world during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, which falls in July and August this year.

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