

Panic over MERS virus fades in Saudi

June 20 2013, by Assad Abboud

People in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province have again started greeting friends with the traditional kiss on the cheek, and face masks in public are becoming rarer, as panic subsides over the outbreak of a deadly respiratory disease that hit the country last year.

"We continue to kiss each other when we meet relatives and friends, and we organise evenings without wearing masks or taking any precautionary measures," said Badr Abdullah, as he bought groceries at a shopping centre in Al-Hufuf, the main city in Al-Ahsa governorate.

"At the beginning, panic hit us. But now, the situation is back to normal," Abdullah said.

Last June, the province was hit for the first time with what became a spate of cases of what was dubbed Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) because of the high proportion of cases reported in the region.

Out of 64 cases worldwide, the virus has killed 38 people, the [World Health Organisation](#) (WHO) says. Of that total, 49 cases have been reported in Saudi Arabia, with 32 people dying.

But Abdullah, like many in Eastern Province, said he believes "most of those affected are aged people who suffered [chronic illnesses](#)."

The virus is a member of the coronavirus family, which includes the pathogen that causes [Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome](#).

SARS sparked global panic in 2003 after it jumped to humans from animals in Asia and killed some 800 people.

Like SARS, MERS appears to cause a [lung infection](#), causing fever, cough and breathing trouble. But it differs in that it also causes rapid [kidney failure](#).

Hospitals in the province have taken precautionary measures, distributing masks and urging people to observe strict hygiene rules, such as washing their hands regularly, using tissues when they sneeze, and avoiding gatherings.

But pharmacist Adel Ali said that early panic had died down recently, and that sales of the [face masks](#) recommended by the health authorities had fallen.

"At the beginning, people were scared. But now, the sale of masks has dropped," he said.

Mustafa al-Hamadeh, who studies in the United States and has returned to Saudi for holidays, said he thought the fear of the virus was "exaggerated."

"I thought of cancelling my trip because of information carried by media on this virus. But I noticed when I got here that the situation is normal and I have kissed all those that I met," said the 23-year-old university student.

[Health authorities](#) have organised seminars and put up billboards to warn of the symptoms of the virus.

The campaign urged anyone suffering a high temperature, coughing fits and breathing difficulties to go to hospital immediately.

The health ministry also set up a web page discussing the virus.

Saudi Arabia is home to the two holiest sites of Islam, and hosts the annual Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca, when hundreds of thousands descend on the country from around the world.

And the authorities have decided to cut the number of authorised pilgrims, saying that was due to construction work to expand the holy site, with no word on the virus.

WHO Director General Margaret Chan said in May that there was no need to place travel restrictions for the time being, but said it was "urgent" to look into the issue of the pilgrimage.

A delegation from the WHO visited Saudi Arabia earlier this month to assess the situation and commended the kingdom for taking prompt measures to combat the virus.

While most of the cases have been concentrated in [Saudi Arabia](#), the virus has also been found in Jordan, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates.

Cases have also been found in France, Germany, Italy, Tunisia and Britain, mostly patients transferred there from the Middle East for treatment or people who had travelled to the region and become ill after they returned, the WHO said.

Scientists at the Erasmus medical centre in the Dutch city of Rotterdam have suggested that bats could be a natural source for the virus.

Health officials have voiced concern about the high proportion of deaths relative to cases, warning that MERS could spark a new global crisis if it mutates into a form that spreads more easily.

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