Malaysia reports first Asian death from MERS virus

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A Malaysian man who went on a pilgrimage to Saudi Arabia has become the first death in Asia from Middle East respiratory syndrome, while the Philippines has isolated a health worker who tested positive for the deadly coronavirus.

Malaysia's health ministry said the Muslim man returned to Malaysia on March 29 and developed a high fever and cough and had difficulty breathing more than a week later. The man, a 54-year-old from southern Johor state neighboring Singapore, died Sunday in a hospital, it said Wednesday.

"Investigations showed that the cause of death is severe pneumonia secondary to MERS-CoV," the ministry said in a statement.

The ministry urged all passengers travelling with the victim on Turkish Airlines on March 29 to report for health checks. It said it was also checking on people who have been in close contact with the man.

MERS belongs to a family of viruses that includes both the common cold and SARS, which killed some 800 people in a global outbreak in 2003. It can cause fever, breathing problems, pneumonia and kidney failure. It was first identified in 2012 in the Middle East, where most cases since have been diagnosed.

In the Philippines, Health Secretary Enrique Ona said the Filipino health worker had a positive blood test for the virus but showed no symptoms.

The man had personal contact with another Filipino hospital worker who died of the virus last week in the United Arab Emirates. Blood test results were released in the UAE after he arrived in the Philippines, and authorities immediately informed the Philippine Embassy.

The man has been isolated and people who had contact with him are being traced and quarantined, Ona said. Officials are also tracing the plane passengers who were seated near the Filipino during the flight to Manila.

The health department said it is sending an epidemiology expert and an infectious disease specialist to UAE after the death of the Filipino there and reports that six other Filipinos were found to have the virus.

Singapore's health ministry instructed hospitals to be vigilant in testing for the virus if patients reported serious respiratory illness and have traveled abroad. The ministry said the possibility of an imported case cannot be ruled out given global travel patterns.

The World Health Organization said it has been informed of 238 confirmed cases globally, including 92 deaths, since September 2012.

While MERS does not seem to spread as quickly between people as SARS did, it appears to be more deadly.