

MERS fears prompt ER closure at Saudi hospital (Update)

April 8 2014

The main public hospital in the Saudi city of Jeddah has closed its emergency room after a rise in cases of the MERS virus among medical staff, the health ministry said Tuesday.

A Jeddah paramedic was among two more people Saudi health authorities reported on Sunday had died from the SARS-like disease, bringing the nationwide death toll to 66.

On Monday, the health ministry reported four more MERS cases in Jeddah, two of them among health workers, prompting authorities to close the emergency department at the city's King Fahd Hospital.

Patients were being transferred to other hospitals while the department was disinfected in a process expected to take 24 hours, the ministry said.

It reassured residents that the situation remained "stable" and "all precautionary measures are being taken to deal with the virus."

But the closure caused widespread public concern, fuelled by rumours on social networks.

"I'm afraid to send my children to school," said Jeddah resident Bassem Ben Ali, 33.

Jeddah accounts for just 11 of the 175 cases of Middle East Respiratory Syndrome reported by Saudi authorities since the disease first appeared

in the kingdom in September 2012.

Of those, two have died, six have recovered and three are still undergoing treatment.

The MERS virus is considered a deadlier but less-transmissible cousin of the SARS virus that erupted in Asia in 2003 and infected 8,273 people, nine percent of whom died.

Experts are still struggling to understand the disease, for which there is no known vaccine.

A study has said the virus has been "extraordinarily common" in camels for at least 20 years, and may have been passed directly from the animals to humans.

The World Health Organisation said at the end of March that it had been told of 206 laboratory-confirmed cases of MERS infection worldwide, of which 86 had been fatal.

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