

Saudi Arabia reports pilgrim infected with MERS

April 24 2014, by Abdullah Al-Shihri



In this Thursday, Oct. 17, 2013, file photo, Egyptian Muslim pilgrims, some wearing masks as a precaution against the Middle East respiratory syndrome, pray after they cast stones at a pillar, symbolizing the stoning of Satan, in a ritual called "Jamarat," the last rite of the annual hajj, in Mina near the Muslim holy city of Mecca, Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah sacked the country's health minister on Monday, April 21, 2014, amid a spike in deaths and infections from the virus known as the Middle East respiratory syndrome, or MERS. The official Saudi Press Agency carried the royal order that said Abdullah al-Rabiah was relieved of his post as Health Minister, and that Labor Minister Adel Faqih will temporarily take over the health minister's portfolio until a replacement is named. The statement said al-Rabiah is now adviser to the Royal Court. (AP

Photo/Amr Nabil, File)

In the past 24 hours, Saudi Arabia has reported four new deaths from a Middle East virus related to SARS and 36 more cases of infection, including a Turkish pilgrim in Mecca.

Officials are struggling to alleviate concerns that the [virus](#) is spreading amid a spike in infections over the past several weeks. Many of the infections reported Wednesday and Thursday are [health workers](#).

Prince Miteb, the son of ruler King Abdullah and the head of the Saudi National Guard, was quoted in newspapers Thursday saying that the king arrived in the eastern city of Jiddah sooner than usual in order to be with the people there, amid a rise in infections. The king traditionally spends his summers in Jiddah, where the seaside weather is cooler than in the capital.

"Every Saudi citizen is more valuable to the king than himself," the prince was quoted as saying in the state-backed al-Watan newspaper.

The Middle East respiratory syndrome, or MERS, belongs to a family of viruses known as coronaviruses that include both the common cold and SARS, or severe acute respiratory syndrome, which killed some 800 people in a global outbreak in 2003. MERS can cause symptoms such as fever, breathing problems, pneumonia and kidney failure.

The most recent deaths reported by the Saudi Health Ministry bring to 85 the number of people who have died in the kingdom from the virus that appeared in 2012. The kingdom has recorded a total of at least 297 confirmed cases.



In this Wednesday, April 16, 2014, file photo, passengers walk past the medical quarantine area showing information sheets for the Middle East respiratory syndrome coronavirus at the arrival section of Manila's International Airport in Paranaque, south of Manila. One expert says recent outbreaks of MERS in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates that led to more than 20 infections, many among health-care workers, "have put us into uncharted territory." Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah sacked the country's health minister on Monday, April 21, 2014, amid a spike in deaths and infections from the virus known as the Middle East respiratory syndrome, or MERS. The official Saudi Press Agency carried the royal order that said Abdullah al-Rabiah was relieved of his post as Health Minister, and that Labor Minister Adel Faqih will temporarily take over the health minister's portfolio until a replacement is named. The statement said al-Rabiah is now adviser to the Royal Court. (AP Photo/Aaron Favila, File)

There is no vaccine or treatment for the virus, and it is still unclear how it is transmitted.

The 65-year-old Turkish pilgrim is among six new cases reported in Mecca, where millions of Muslims from around the world descend year-round. That's raised concerns that the virus could spread among pilgrims.

The ministry said the youngest cases from the newest batch of infections are two 13 year olds, one in the city of Medina and another in Jiddah. In one other case, a 25-year-old Saudi male is being treated in Jordan, according to the Saudi Health Ministry.

The ministry reported the four latest Saudi deaths in separate statements: a 45-year-old male [health](#) worker in al-Kharj, a city about 50 miles (80 kilometers) outside the capital Riyadh; a 29-year-old male who contracted the virus "from the public" in Jiddah; a 72-year-old woman in Riyadh; and a 68-year-old man in Mecca.

On Monday, the king removed the country's health minister following the recent spike in MERS cases. The next day, acting Health Minister Adel Faqih toured a hospital in Jiddah and met with MERS patients while wearing gloves, a medical robe and face mask. An outbreak among health workers prompted authorities to shut down the emergency ward of that hospital for 48 hours earlier this month.

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