

Saudi announces 11 new MERS infections (Update)

April 23 2014

Saudi Arabia on Wednesday announced 11 new cases of MERS, including a 13-year-old child, as its acting health minister vowed to keep the public better informed about the coronavirus.

The new cases bring to 272 the total number of MERS infections, including 81 deaths, registered across the kingdom—worst hit by the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome which was first detected in eastern Saudi Arabia in September 2012.

Most of the latest cases are in Riyadh and the commercial hub Jeddah, with one case in the Muslim holy city of Mecca, visited each year by millions of pilgrims from around the world.

Three of the new infections were of health workers, while a 13-year-old Saudi girl is among cases recorded in the Red Sea port city of Jeddah.

A spike in MERS cases and public fears prompted the Gulf state to dismiss its health minister, Abdullah al-Rabiah, on Monday without an official explanation.

Rabiah last week visited hospitals in Jeddah to calm a public hit by panic over the spread of the virus among medical staff that triggered the temporary closure of the city's King Fahd Hospital emergency room.

Labour Minister Adel Fakieh, who has taken over as acting health minister, said on Twitter late Tuesday that he had visited the Jeddah

hospital.

Fakieh promised "transparency and to promptly provide the media and society with the information needed" on the virus.

At least four doctors at King Fahd Hospital reportedly resigned last week after refusing to treat MERS patients.

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

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

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

The World Health Organisation said it had been informed of 253 laboratory-confirmed cases of MERS infection worldwide, of which 93 had been fatal.

The WHO in a statement issued in Cairo on Wednesday expressed concern about the rising number of cases, especially in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

Its Eastern Mediterranean Regional Office said it has offered to help Saudi Arabia and the UAE investigate the current outbreaks "in order to determine the transmission chain of this recent cluster".

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