Saudi names new health minister to combat MERS virus

December 8 2014

King Abdullah named a new health minister Monday to lead the fight against the MERS virus that has cost more than 350 lives in Saudi Arabia, after his predecessor was sacked.

Mohammed bin Ali bin Hayazaa al-Hayazaa replaces Abdullah al-Rabiah who was dismissed in April as concerns grew over the kingdom's handling of the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome coronavirus (MERS-CoV).

Before Hayazaa's appointment as part of a cabinet reshuffle, Labour Minister Adel Fakieh had been serving as acting health minister.

During the tenure of Fakieh, who promised "transparency" over MERS, the World Health Organisation said a surge in MERS cases had receded but urged continued vigilance.

In October the ministry said MERS remained a significant threat to Saudi Arabia, after a series of cases in the western city of Taif.

Research by Saudi scientists indicates that camels play a role in the transmission of the virus to humans.

MERS has surfaced in about 20 countries but hit the Gulf kingdom hardest, with 818 cases and 352 deaths since 2012.

The health minister and other new cabinet members were appointed

through royal decrees published by the official Saudi Press Agency.

In another key replacement, Abdul Aziz bin Abdullah al-Khudairi takes over the culture and information portfolio after Abdulaziz Khoja was sacked in November.

A royal decree fired Khoja after militants killed eight members of the minority Shiite community in an unprecedented attack in Eastern Province.

The decree said Khoja left the job "at his request". His dismissal followed Shiite calls for action against hate speech in the media.

Major posts including defence, foreign affairs and oil were unchanged in Monday's shuffle which also made changes to the following ministries:

- At higher education, Khalid bin Abdullah al-Sabti replaces Khalid bin Mohammed al-Angari.

- At Islamic affairs and endowments, Suleiman bin Abdullah Aba al-Khail replaces Sheikh Salih bin Abdul Aziz al-Sheikh.

- At communications and information technology, Fahad bin Mutad bin Shafaq al-Hamad replaces Mohammed Jameel bin Ahmed Mala.

- At social affairs, Salman bin Saad al-Hameed replaces Yousif bin Ahmed al-Othaimain.

- At agriculture, Waleed bin Abdul Kareem al-Khuraiji replaces Fahad bin Abdul Rahman Balghunaim.

- At transport, Abdullah bin Abdulrahman al-Muqbel replaces Jabara bin Eid al-Siresri.

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