

WHO chief voices optimism over S. Korea MERS outbreak

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WHO chief Margaret Chan expressed guarded optimism Thursday over South Korea's ability to contain a MERS outbreak, saying it was now "on a very good footing" after an initially slow response to the virus which has killed 23 people.

Middle East Respiratory Syndrome has spread at an alarmingly rapid pace in Asia's fourth-largest economy since the first case was diagnosed on May 20, infecting 165 in what is the largest outbreak outside Saudi Arabia.

Following a strongly worded warning Wednesday by the World Health Organization in Geneva—which described the spread of the disease as a "wake-up call"—Chan offered a more positive assessment.

"Our current assessment of the MERS situation in South Korea... is the [government](#) is now on a very good footing," she told reporters, adding that the situation does not constitute an international public health emergency.

"The MERS outbreak will be brought under control... although it may take a little longer than everyone would like to see," said Chan, who is in South Korea for a previously scheduled conference.

She said that the government had admitted it got off to a "slow start" but that its efforts strengthened "very quickly and systemically and very significantly", resulting in a decline in new cases.

The good news is that scientists have not detected any genetic change in the virus, she said.

Chan's comments come as the health ministry reported three more deaths and three more cases, despite authorities saying earlier in the week that South Korea had weathered the worst of the crisis.

The WHO said Wednesday that a lack of awareness about the virus among [health workers](#) and the public was a major contributing factor to its rapid spread.

MERS patients had been kept in crowded emergency rooms for long periods, it said, and the practice of "doctor shopping"—visiting multiple hospitals for second and third opinions—also helped the spread of the disease.

The custom of many visitors and family members staying with infected patients in their hospital rooms also facilitated the spread of the virus, the UN health agency's emergency committee meeting found.

Experts within South Korea have also criticised President Park Geun-Hye's government for its response to the outbreak.

"There are doubts whether the quarantine and monitoring are being carried out thoroughly for the thousands of people who have been placed in isolation", Kang Cheong-Hee, Vice President of the Korean Medical Association told AFP.

Kang called for tougher measures to ensure confirmed patients and suspected virus carriers do not mingle with other people.

Tantrum under quarantine

The number of new infections had fallen steadily until Tuesday, when the government said it was cautiously optimistic the worst was over, but eight new cases reported Wednesday dashed those hopes.

Officials said that 35 percent of the total cases involved families and friends who had visited patients or given them nursing care, while another 18 percent were medics.

More than 6,700 people are currently being held in quarantine in a bid to halt the spread of the virus, up three percent from Wednesday. Around 4,500 others have already been released from isolation.

But alarming reports of infected people slipping through quarantine measures have undermined government efforts to assuage public fear over a virus that has already begun hurting the country's sagging economy.

A 41-year-old man belatedly told authorities that he developed symptoms several days earlier than he had initially reported, prompting health workers to urgently quarantine dozens of people he had come into contact with on the resort island of Jeju.

The infected man refused to stay in hospital while being tested and threw a tantrum, vowing to "spread the virus everywhere" and breaking a hospital door lock. He then took a taxi and returned home, before being forcibly put in isolation.

The luxury Hotel Shilla on Jeju announced Thursday it had shut after it emerged that the man and his family had stayed there for several days.

The hotel said it had asked all guests to leave and would remain closed until after concerns over transmission of the [virus](#) "are dispelled", Yonhap reported.

The last confirmed case involved a 79-year-old man who had been receiving dialysis at a hospital in Seoul even after he developed MERS symptoms nine days ago.

The 111 other patients who received dialysis treatment in the same hospital room will now have to be put under quarantine, the ministry said.

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