

Fresh cases, 900 schools closed in S. Korea

MERS outbreak (Update)

June 4 2015

Hundreds of schools closed Thursday in South Korea as officials struggled to ease growing panic over an outbreak of the MERS virus that has infected 35 people, killed two and caused thousands to cancel travel plans.

More than 900 schools—from kindergartens to colleges—have now shut their gates in response to public fears over what has become the largest outbreak of Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) outside Saudi Arabia.

Five more cases were confirmed on Thursday, bringing the total number of known infections to 35, the health ministry said.

The first case—reported on May 20—was of a 68-year-old man diagnosed after a trip to Saudi Arabia.

Since then, more than 1,660 people who may have been exposed directly or indirectly to the virus have been placed under varying levels of quarantine.

While around 160 were isolated at state-designated facilities, most were told to stay home and strictly limit their interactions with other people.

In Seoul, growing public concern has been reflected in the daily increase in the number of commuters wearing face masks on buses and subways.

The government's MERS hotline took more than 3,000 calls on Wednesday.

Mass tourist cancellations

The anxiety has been exported, with the Korea Tourism Organisation (KTO) reporting Thursday that around 7,000 tourists—mostly from China and Taiwan—had cancelled planned group trips to South Korea.

"A mass cancellation of this scale is very unusual... and many travellers cited the MERS outbreak as the main reason," a KTO spokesman told AFP.

The military has also been affected with more than 20 symptomatic soldiers quarantined, including six who had contact with a South Korean air force officer recently diagnosed with MERS.

The officer was serving at the air base in Osan, south of Seoul, which also hosts the US 51st Fighter Wing.

"Our hospital has established a plan to care for our population as well as screening those coming onto Osan," Colonel Brook Leonard wrote on the unit's official Facebook page.

President Park Geun-Hye's administration, and health officials in general, have been criticised for responding too slowly to the initial outbreak.

In an emergency meeting with health officials on Wednesday, Park called for "utmost efforts" to curb the spread of the virus and ease public fear.

MERS has now infected 1,161 people globally, with 436 deaths. More

than 20 countries have been affected, with most cases in Saudi Arabia.

The virus, which has no known cure or vaccine, is considered a deadlier but less infectious cousin of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), which killed hundreds of people when it appeared in Asia in 2003.

The World Health Organisation said it expected more infections in South Korea, but stressed that there was "no evidence of sustained transmission in the community".

The South's Unification Ministry said it had agreed to a request from North Korea to provide thermal-imaging cameras to screen arrivals at their joint industrial zone in Kaesong.

Kaesong lies 10 kilometres (six miles) over the border in North Korea, and around 500 South Koreans travel there every day to manage factories that employ some 53,000 North Korean workers.

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