

S. Korea reports 7th MERS death, vows to end crisis (Update)

June 9 2015

South Korea Tuesday reported its seventh death from Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) as the government—concerned about the economic impact—said it hoped to end the crisis this week.

Eight new infections brought the total number of cases to 95 in the largest outbreak outside Saudi Arabia, following the diagnosis of the first patient back on May 20.

The virus has caused widespread public anxiety and led to a plunge in cinema ticket sales and dwindling attendance at baseball games and other public events.

"Public concerns are rising over the negative impact of the MERS outbreak on our economy and society," Acting Prime Minister Choi Kyung-Hwan said during a meeting with top health officials.

"So we have decided to... launch an active, all-out response with the goal of ending the MERS crisis within this week," said Choi, who is also the finance minister.

The latest fatality was a 68-year-old woman who was infected by a MERS patient at a hospital in Seoul.

All the infections so far have been restricted to hospitals, and the ministry stressed that all seven who died had pre-existing health problems.

The virus 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.

There is no vaccine or cure for MERS which, according to World Health Organization (WHO) data, has a fatality rate of around 35 percent.

"People may be concerned, but I hope that they will not overreact and cooperate to ensure that economic activities will not be weakened," President Park Geun-Hye told a cabinet meeting.

The outbreak has hit the tourist industry, with more than 45,000 scheduled visitors—mostly Chinese—cancelling trips to South Korea in the first week of June, the Korea Tourism Board said.

Travel alert

Xiu Xin, a Chinese tourist in Seoul, said he had decided to go ahead with his trip despite the health scare.

"I'd heard about the virus and was a little worried. But after I got here, it wasn't so scary," Xiu told AFP.

"I'm just wearing this to feel better," he added, pointing to his surgical mask.

Hong Kong issued a "red" alert on Tuesday, advising against non-essential travel to South Korea for health reasons. Seoul rejected the move, arguing that the WHO had not recommended any such move.

The eight new cases reported Tuesday were well down on the 23 fresh infections announced the day before, but experts said it was premature to talk about a declining trend.

"This week will be a crucial period," the health ministry said, adding that three people had been discharged from hospital after fully recovering from the disease.

Almost 2,900 people have been placed under quarantine—most of them in their own homes—and nearly 2,200 schools have been closed across South Korea because of the outbreak.

All the cases so far have been in hospitals, but WHO scientist Peter Ben Embarek said the disease could spread because of the large number of "contacts" with infected people.

"We will not be surprised if we see a few cases coming up from the community," he said in Geneva.

Questions have also been raised over the World Student Games, due to be held in the southern city of Gwangju next month.

Organisers of the Universiade said no country had withdrawn and the event's medical team stressed that preparations were proceeding normally.

"The MERS outbreak which has been quite limited will not have any effect on the Games," the team's statement said.

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