

S. Korea says MERS outbreak shows signs of subsiding

June 19 2015

South Korea said Friday that the MERS outbreak that has killed 24 people appears to have begun subsiding, as it reported one new case—the lowest rate of new infections in two weeks.

This brought to 166 the total number of confirmed cases of Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) in the country since the first was confirmed on May 20 in what is the largest outbreak outside Saudi Arabia.

The number of people in quarantine had fallen 12 percent from Thursday to 5,930, a day after Thailand reported Southeast Asia's first case of the deadly virus since the disease was confirmed in South Korea.

The government of President Park Geun-Hye has come under attack for its inadequate initial response but World Health Organization (WHO) chief Margaret Chan expressed guarded optimism Thursday over South Korea's ability to contain the outbreak.

She said Seoul was now "on a very good footing" after an initially slow response.

A rural village, which had been sealed off for quarantine, was opened up Friday, allowing its population of 102 people to resume normal activities.

"Apparently, the outbreak has started subsiding," a health ministry

official in Seoul said.

"But we have to wait and see whether more cases occur" in hospitals exposed to the virus, he added.

The latest case involved a 62-year-old man who contracted the virus while caring for an infected family member at Samsung Medical Centre in Seoul, the epicentre of the outbreak that has been linked to about half of all confirmed cases.

The hospital suspended services to non-MERS sufferers on Sunday, with other patients being moved to different medical facilities, and will remain closed for other treatment at least until Wednesday next week.

Currently 112 patients are in the hospital, while 30 people who have recovered have been released.

Jangdeok Village in Sunchang County south of Seoul was back to normal after road blocks were lifted Friday, two weeks after a 72-year-old resident there was diagnosed with the virus.

"This is good. I felt like I had been a prisoner for a long time", Park Yoo-Hyun, a 72-year-old farmer, was quoted as saying by Yonhap news agency.

A second village under quarantine is expected to follow suit on Monday, barring any new cases there.

'Slow start'

On Tuesday a senior health official expressed cautious optimism that the worst of the outbreak was over, only for eight new cases to emerge the following day when the WHO warned that South Korea was facing a

"wake-up call" and urged more vigilance.

But WHO chief Chan said Thursday that the outbreak would be brought under control "although it may take a little longer than everyone would like to see".

The good news was that scientists had not detected any genetic change in the virus, she added.

However, the government's laggardly initial response to the disease has fuelled public discontent with the administration, which began in April last year when the Sewol ferry disaster claimed more than 300 lives, mostly high-school students.

Park's approval ratings have fallen further over the past week to 29 percent, the lowest since she took office in 2013.

In Bangkok, Thai authorities Friday tested three relatives of a 75-year-old Omani man found to have MERS—the results for two were negative while one was "inconclusive".

Surachet Satitniramai, acting permanent secretary of the public health ministry, told AFP "we will check all three again" without providing a timeframe.

Thailand, a booming medical tourism hub popular with people from the Middle East, confirmed the man had MERS Thursday, days after he arrived in Bangkok for treatment for a heart condition.

On Friday evening the Omani patient was in a "stable condition", Surachet said.

Thai authorities are monitoring 85 other people who have been in

contact with the Omani man, including those on board his flight to Bangkok, at hospital or in their homes, a health ministry spokesman told AFP.

At a press conference, Mondej Sookpranee, an infectious diseases doctor at Bumrungrad Hospital where the Omani man was first admitted, said it had placed 58 of its staff in quarantine but no new MERS cases had been detected.

Later in Geneva WHO spokesman Christian Lindmeier praised Thailand's "swift action" and "vigilance" in isolating its first MERS patient and his relatives.

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