

UN: Spread of MERS in South Korea isn't global emergency

June 17 2015, by Maria Cheng



An unidentified student is checked her temperature as a precaution against MERS (Middle East Respiratory Syndrome) at Gwanghui Elementary School in Seoul, South Korea, Wednesday, June 17, 2015. The death toll in South Korea's MERS outbreak increased Tuesday even as schools reopened and people recovered from the virus. (AP Photo/Ahn Young-joon)

The World Health Organization says the spread of a mysterious virus

from the Middle East to South Korea doesn't merit being declared a global emergency despite infecting more than 160 people in the biggest outbreak outside the Arabian peninsula.

In a statement Wednesday, the U.N. health agency called the epidemic "a wake-up call" and warned all countries to prepare for potential outbreaks of the Middle East respiratory syndrome, or MERS.

WHO acknowledged there were still fundamental gaps in its understanding of the disease nearly three years after MERS was first identified.

"We really don't understand the situation very well," said Dr. Keiji Fukuda, a WHO Assistant Director-General, noting it was unclear if the disease could be spread by people without symptoms or what environmental factors might speed transmission.

Fukuda said camels are the only known animal reservoir for the disease, although there could be others. He added there was no proof MERS had mutated into a more dangerous form in South Korea, where 19 people have died.

Overall worldwide, 458 people have died from MERS since 2012.

WHO recommends that people avoid contact with camels, not drink camel milk or urine and only eat camel meat that has been well-cooked.

MERS appear to be spread among people in respiratory droplets such as by coughing, although infections have mostly occurred in those who had close contact with MERS patients. More than two dozen countries have reported cases, including the U.S., Britain, France and Germany.



A security person, left, checks a student's temperature as a precaution against MERS (Middle East Respiratory Syndrome) at Gwanghui Elementary School in Seoul, South Korea, Wednesday, June 17, 2015. The death toll in South Korea's MERS outbreak increased Tuesday even as schools reopened and people recovered from the virus. (AP Photo/Ahn Young-joon)

Some experts lamented that little had changed in WHO's ability to respond to outbreaks since last year's devastating Ebola outbreak in West Africa—which left more than 11,000 dead still hasn't been contained.

"I don't understand why they have not prioritized developing a camel vaccine to stop transmission from young camels to humans," said Michael Osterholm, an infectious diseases expert at the University of Minnesota.

"If MERS shows up in the inner cities of one of the developing world

megacities, like Lagos or Kinshasa, we will be in real trouble," he said. "We know there will be future outbreaks if MERS isn't stopped in the Middle East, but we are not very close to doing that now."



Seoul Mayor Park Won-soon, second right in front, checks a student's temperature as a precaution against MERS (Middle East Respiratory Syndrome) at Gwanghui Elementary School in Seoul, South Korea, Wednesday, June 17, 2015. The death toll in South Korea's MERS outbreak increased Tuesday even as schools reopened and people recovered from the virus. (AP Photo/Ahn Young-joon)



The St. Raphael hospital of the Niels-Stensen group hospitals, photographed in Ostercappeln , northern Germany, Tuesday June 16, 2015. Michael Schiffbaenker, a spokesman for the Niels-Stensen group of hospitals, said Tuesday a man died earlier this month in the facility in Lower Saxony. He said the hospital had agreed with the family not to release details of the fatal infection but said the MERS virus had left his body weakened. (Friso Gentsch/dpa via AP)



People wear masks as a precaution against MERS (Middle East Respiratory Syndrome) as they arrive at Seoul Railway Station in Seoul, South Korea, Tuesday, June 16, 2015. The death toll continued to mount in South Korea's MERS outbreak on Tuesday even as schools reopen and people recover from the virus. (AP Photo/Ahn Young-joon)



Visitors wearing masks as a precaution against the MERS (Middle East Respiratory Syndrome) virus walk at a shopping district in Seoul, South Korea, Tuesday, June 16, 2015. The death toll continued to mount in South Korea's MERS outbreak on Tuesday even as schools reopen and people recover from the virus. (AP Photo/Lee Jin-man)



Workers wearing protective gears, spray antiseptic solution as a precaution against the spread of MERS, Middle East Respiratory Syndrome, virus at the Sejong Culture Center in Seoul, South Korea, Tuesday, June 16, 2015. The outbreak of the poorly understood disease has caused widespread fear in South Korea and criticism that health workers and the government failed to initially recognize and quickly contain it. (AP Photo/Ahn Young-joon)



Workers wearing protective gears, spray antiseptic solution as a precaution against the spread of MERS, Middle East Respiratory Syndrome, virus at the Sejong Culture Center in Seoul, South Korea, Tuesday, June 16, 2015. The outbreak of the poorly understood disease has caused widespread fear in South Korea and criticism that health workers and the government failed to initially recognize and quickly contain it. (AP Photo/Ahn Young-joon)

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Citation: UN: Spread of MERS in South Korea isn't global emergency (2015, June 17) retrieved 10 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2015-06-mers-south-korea-isnt-global.html>

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