

Samsung heir apologises over S. Korea MERS outbreak

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The heir to South Korean business giant Samsung on Tuesday publicly bowed his head in apology for one of its flagship hospitals becoming an epicentre of the MERS virus, as health officials reported three new cases.

Samsung Medical Centre in Seoul has accounted for about half of all 175 confirmed cases of MERS in South Korea, the largest outbreak of the disease outside Saudi Arabia.

"Samsung Medical Centre has failed to control the infection and spread of the virus, causing great pain and concern to the people", said Jay Y. Lee, heir and vice chairman of Samsung Electronics.

"I apologise, with my head bowed," he said before bowing deeply in front of TV cameras in a live public apology.

He promised to thoroughly overhaul the medical centre. Its position as one of the country's most prestigious hospitals has been seriously undermined by the outbreak.

"The hospital will take full responsibility for the treatment of the patients and we will make best efforts to prevent any recurrence", he said in a rare public address.

Lee, who also heads the Samsung foundation that operates Samsung Medical Centre, pledged to actively support the development of a

vaccine against the MERS virus.

Lee's father and the chairman of Samsung Electronics, Lee Kun-Hee, has been bedridden in the hospital for more than a year since suffering a heart attack.

Song Jae-Hoon, the head of Samsung Medical Center, admitted the hospital had failed to tackle the disease at the early stages of its transmission.

"We had shortcomings in initial responses. We are deeply sorry," he said after taking over the podium from Lee.

New Cases

According to South Korea's health ministry, two of the three new carriers announced on Tuesday came into contact with the virus at two different hospitals in Seoul, one of which was the Samsung Medical Centre.

The third case was a family member of another patient. The ministry said no additional deaths had been caused by the virus.

Of the 175 confirmed cases, 27 have died, 54 have recovered and been released from hospital and 94 are still being treated, of whom 16 are on life support machines.

Some 2,805 people are still under quarantine, down around a quarter from Monday.

The first case was diagnosed in South Korea on May 20.

Separately, a 39-old woman who had been infected with the virus and

recovered gave birth to a baby at Samsung Medical Centre on Tuesday, Yonhap news agency reported.

The family-oriented Samsung Group has merged, broken out or newly listed some of its key units in recent years as patriarch Lee Kun-Hee prepares to hand over the reins to his son, Jay Y. Lee.

Samsung Electronics, which accounts for the lion's share of the group's sales and profits, is the world's largest mobile phone manufacturer.

The founding family controls the empire through complicated webs of cross shareholdings among more than 60 subsidiaries.

The group has sprawled into various businesses ranging from electronics to construction, shipbuilding fashion and hotels.

It earns a collective revenue equal to around 20 percent of South Korea's annual economic output.

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