

South Korea passes new law to curb MERS outbreak

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South Korea has introduced a new law designed to curb a MERS outbreak, tightening quarantine restrictions and imposing jail sentences on those who defy anti-infection measures in a crisis that has now left 31 dead.

Meanwhile, a South Korean man who had become China's only confirmed case has been cured and discharged Friday, the Health Ministry here said.

Under the new law, passed in parliament late Thursday, people infected with the virus who lie to state investigators about how they came into contact with the disease will face a fine or a prison sentence.

"False testimony would entail up to two years in prison or 20 million won (\$18,000) in fines," said the Health Ministry about the new law.

It replaces the maximum two-million-won fine that could be meted out to anyone who did not tell the truth under previous legislation.

"Interviewees will (now) feel compelled to provide honest answers," the ministry said in a press statement.

The new law also strengthens officials' power to restrict the movement of infected people and close contaminated facilities, with offenders who refuse to follow their orders also facing two years in prison or a \$18,000 fine.

The number of state health workers in charge of preventing outbreaks and tracing them will also be doubled to more than 60.

The legislation comes as South Korea's government is facing criticism for failing to stop the MERS outbreak, which has now become the largest outside Saudi Arabia.

Critics say the lack of coordinated control among health authorities, hospitals and local governments, combined with an inadequate number of quarantine experts and shortfalls in expertise, are responsible for the failure to stem the virus in the initial stage of the outbreak.

Authorities under fire

Health authorities also came under fire for withholding the names of health facilities where the virus has been traced to, letting infected people go "doctor shopping"—visiting different hospitals to obtain second or third opinions, furthering the spread of the disease.

The country on Thursday announced a \$14 billion stimulus package to boost the economy as the outbreak further dampened the already sagging economy, scaring away tourists and forcing consumers to stay home.

The finance ministry slashed its growth forecast for this year to 3.1 percent from an earlier projection of 3.8 percent.

The ministry said the MERS outbreak could pare up to 0.3 percentage points off annual economic growth.

Two new fatalities were reported on Friday, the health ministry said—both women, aged 79 and 80, who had existing health conditions.

A doctor at Seoul's Samsung Medical Center, the hospital to which

nearly half of all infections have been traced, was also confirmed to have contracted the disease.

The hospital earlier this week decided to extend indefinitely a 12-day suspension of normal services as patients, doctors and visitors continued to be diagnosed with the disease.

One patient, a 55-year-old ambulance driver at the Samsung hospital, continued to go to work via subway for days after developing symptoms in early June, coming into contact with nearly 500 people.

The latest fatalities brought the total death toll to 31, the health ministry said, with 181 people diagnosed with the deadly virus since the first case emerged on May 20.

Of those diagnosed, aside from the deceased, 81 have recovered and 69 are still being treated, including 13 listed in critical condition.

Currently, a total of 2,931 people are in isolation, including 759 in hospital and 2,172 at their homes.

A 44-year-old South Korean man who was diagnosed on May 29 and had been treated in the southern Chinese province of Guangdong was released from hospital after testing negative for the virus for three times, the South Korean health ministry said in a press statement.

He flew to Hong Kong on May 26, a day after his father was diagnosed in South Korea, and travelled on to Guangdong by bus.

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