

South Korea sees end of MERS threat after outbreak killed 36

July 28 2015



South Korean Prime Minister Hwang Kyo-ahn speaks during a meeting about MERS (Middle East Respiratory Syndrome) with government officials at the government complex in Seoul, South Korea, Tuesday, July 28, 2015. Hwang says the country is now virtually free of the deadly MERS virus. (AP Photo/Lee Jin-man)

South Korea said Tuesday it is now virtually free of the deadly MERS virus that killed 36 people and sickened nearly 200 since an outbreak was declared in May.

Prime Minister Hwang Kyo-ahn in a government meeting urged people to return to normal as the country hasn't had a new MERS case in more than three weeks. More than 16,000 people were isolated at hospitals and homes as the government tried to stop the disease's spread, and the last person was lifted from quarantine on Monday.

"It is the judgment of medical experts and the government that people can now feel safe," Hwang said in the meeting, according to the prime minister's office.

Middle East Respiratory Syndrome, discovered in 2012, is caused by a coronavirus in the same family as the common cold and SARS.

The disease usually spreads poorly, but experts suspect South Korea's crowded emergency rooms and hospital wards might have contributed to a wider-than-expected transmission here. South Koreans' habits of "doctor shopping"—visiting multiple facilities to treat the same illness—and having many friends and relatives visit hospitalized patients also might have contributed.

The public alarm over MERS rattled South Korea's economy, which posted its slowest quarterly growth in more than two years in the three months through June. The Bank of Korea partially blamed the slowed growth on sapped consumption as foreign tourists cancelled visits and people stayed home in fear of infection.



South Korean Prime Minister Hwang Kyo-ahn, left, presides over a meeting about MERS (Middle East Respiratory Syndrome) with government officials at the government complex in Seoul, South Korea, Tuesday, July 28, 2015. Hwang says the country is now virtually free of the deadly MERS virus. (AP Photo/Lee Jin-man)

Authorities in seven countries, including several regions in China, Czech Republic and United Arab Emirates, had advised their citizens against traveling to South Korea over the MERS outbreak, and Vietnam on Tuesday became the last country among them to lift the travel warning, according to Seoul's foreign ministry.

Hong Kong is maintaining an alert against non-essential travel to South Korea, but the foreign ministry said it was expecting it to be lifted.

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