Saudi closes emergency ward after spike in MERS virus cases

August 19 2015, byAbdullah Al-Shihri

Saudi authorities closed an emergency ward in one of the kingdom's largest hospitals after at least 46 people, including hospital staff, contracted the potentially fatal Middle East respiratory syndrome, also known as MERS, a health official said Wednesday.

Dr. Hanan Balkhi of the Health Ministry's department for infectious diseases said that of the 46 people infected at King Abdulaziz Medical City in the capital, Riyadh, 15 were medical staff. Another 20 people showing symptoms are being tested, she added.

The patients from the ward, set to remain closed for two weeks, are being transferred to other hospitals, she said.

The Health Ministry recorded three new MERS deaths in Riyadh on Wednesday. The victims were all Saudi males ranging in age from 65 to 86, according the ministry's website. That brings the total number of deaths to 483 since the virus was first identified in 2012.

The ministry said that 1,118 cases have been registered nationwide; 592 have recovered and the rest—43— are being treated. It appears the three who died are from among the 46 people diagnosed with MERS at the emergency ward that was closed.

Most MERS cases have been diagnosed in the Middle East, primarily in Saudi Arabia. The MERS virus belongs to the family of viruses known as coronaviruses, which include both the common cold and SARS, or

severe acute respiratory syndrome. SARS killed some 800 people in a global outbreak in 2003.

The MERS virus can cause symptoms such as fever, breathing problems, pneumonia and kidney failure.

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