

Thais quarantine 33 after Omani tests positive for MERS

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Thai health authorities Tuesday said they had placed 33 people in quarantine after an Omani national seeking medical help in the kingdom tested positive for Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS).

The unnamed man, 71, arrived in Thailand Friday with a fever that doctors in Oman could not treat, Thai officials said.

His positive testing for the contagious disease, which killed more than 30 people in South Korea last year after an outbreak, sparked a scramble to locate anyone who might have been in contact with the man.

"There are 33 people under observation," the Thai Public Health Ministry said in an update Tuesday.

Thai authorities said there were at least 40 people who came into contact with the man who were deemed to be at high risk including 22 passengers on his flight, two taxi drivers, four hotel staff, 11 hospital staff and one relative.

MERS, which first appeared in Saudi Arabia in 2012, is considered a deadlier but less infectious cousin of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), which killed hundreds of people when it emerged in Asia more than a decade ago.

South Korea only recently announced an end to an outbreak of MERS which infected 186 people, killing 36 and forcing the quarantine of more

than 17,000 people.

Thailand is a major regional tourist hub and many people also fly there to seek medical treatment.

It is particularly popular among wealthy Middle Eastern patients with many of the top Bangkok hospitals providing Arabic language services.

Analysts say the country's status as a medical tourism hub leaves it potentially vulnerable.

But Thai health authorities have previously moved swiftly to contain earlier outbreaks.

Last year an Omani man also tested positive for MERS, leading to the quarantine of more than 170 people. He was successfully treated and went home.

Amnuay Gajeena, director-general of Thailand's Disease Control Department, said the condition of the latest MERS patient was positive.

"His condition is stable today, no fever, but a little cough. He can eat and is able to go to the restroom," he said in a statement.

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