

Saudi health minister sacks deputy as MERS toll rises

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Saudi Arabia's health minister has sacked one of his deputies as the death toll by the MERS coronavirus reached 190, the ministry said on Twitter on Tuesday. © 2014 AFP

No reasons were given for the dismissal of deputy minister Ziad Memish.

The then health minister Abdullah al-Rabiah was dismissed in April without official explanation and replaced by labour minister Adel Fakieh, who promised "transparency" in providing the public and media with information about the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome.

MERS is considered a deadlier but less transmissible cousin of the SARS virus that appeared in Asia in 2003 and infected 8,273 people, nine percent of whom died.

Like SARS, it appears to cause a lung infection, with patients suffering coughing, breathing difficulties and a temperature. But MERS differs in that it causes rapid kidney failure.

Last month, Fakieh announced he was sacking the head of the King Fahd Hospital in the western city of Jeddah, where a rise in MERS infections among medical staff sparked panic among the public.

Memish's dismissal comes as the health ministry said in its latest bulletin late Monday that 190 people have died of MERS in the kingdom, the country worst-hit by the virus which first appeared in September 2012.

It said the total number of infections was now 575.

Most cases of the disease have been in Saudi Arabia, but the virus has been imported to more than a dozen other countries. All of those cases have involved people who became ill while in the Middle East.

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