First South Korea virus patient dies as hospital cluster emerges

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Almost half of South Korea's coronavirus patients are linked to a 61-year-old woman who is a member of the Daegu branch of the Shincheonji Church of Jesus

South Korea reported its first death from the novel coronavirus Thursday as a new cluster of infections emerged at a hospital and the

country's total number of cases nearly doubled to more than 100.

The man who died was in his 60s and a long-term patient among 15 people found to be infected at a hospital in Cheongdo county, 320 kilometres (200 miles) south of Seoul, the Korean Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (KCDC) said in a statement.

Two patients who Yonhap news agency said were in the psychiatric ward tested positive for the virus on Wednesday, prompting authorities to begin testing all patients and staff.

The man who died Wednesday had shown symptoms of pneumonia, and his status was only established posthumously.

KCDC on Thursday announced a total of 51 new confirmed cases, taking the nationwide total to 104.

More than 40 were in a cluster in Daegu—near Cheongdo—and centred on the Shincheonji Church of Jesus, an entity often accused of being a cult.

Shincheonji claims its founder, Lee Man-hee, has donned the mantle of Jesus Christ and will take 144,000 people with him to heaven on the day of judgement.

A 61-year-old woman member developed a fever on February 10, but attended at least four church services before being diagnosed.

Local media said she had twice refused to be tested for the coronavirus on the grounds she had not recently travelled abroad.

So far at least 47 other members of the sect have been confirmed as infected, and KCDC said the original patient had visited Cheongdo

earlier this month, not ruling out the possibility she may have been the source of infections there as well.

An epidemiological survey was underway to examine "the possibility of a link" between her and the hospital infections, said KCDC director Jung Eun-kyeong.

"Those who visited the Cheongdo hospital this month should try to avoid outside activity," she added.

Access restricted

The mayor of Daegu—South Korea's fourth-biggest city, with a population of over 2.5 million—advised residents to stay indoors, and commanders at a major US base in the area restricted access.

A total of 64 cases have been confirmed in the city and neighbouring North Gyeongsang province, and Daegu mayor Kwon Young-jin urged residents: "Starting from today, please refrain from leaving your house as much as possible."

The mayor's request is not binding, but one online poster who said they were in the city tweeted: "I can't go out because of Shincheonji and it's driving me crazy.

"Convenience stores and elderly community centres are closed, it takes twice as long for food delivery. It's really making me insane."

Daegu's municipal government said 1,001 Shincheonji members believed to have attended services with the infected woman have been asked to self-quarantine.

The US Army garrison in the city—where around 10,000 soldiers,

civilians and family members live or work—restricted access and instructed any American troops who had recently attended Shincheonji services to self-quarantine.

"Travel in and around Daegu is highly discouraged unless absolutely necessary," the garrison said Thursday in a Facebook post.

"Please avoid public places and public transportation, to include stores, restaurants, subways and other heavily congested areas."

Shincheonji closed down all its facilities nationwide.

"We are deeply sorry that because of one of our members, who thought of her condition as a cold because she had not travelled abroad, led to many in our church being infected and thereby caused concern to the local community," it said in a statement.

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