

Spread of MERS virus slows as toll reaches 27

Just as the spread of the MERS virus in South Korea looked to be slowing considerably, the South Korean Ministry of Health & Welfare has reported that the death toll has now risen to 27, with three more victims confirmed yesterday.



Once again, all three had direct contact with hospitals and medical centres in Seoul treating MERS cases, with the Ministry advising today that the total number of confirmed infections has now reached 172. From this total, 27 have sadly died, 95 are still receiving treatment – with 14 said to be in ‘severe condition’ – and more positively 50 have been discharged altogether.

According to the Ministry, twenty of those who have died in total were male and seven female, with all aged over 60. Twenty five of these unfortunate victims were said to have been in the ‘high risk’ category, being elderly patients who already had underlying life-threatening conditions. These included cardio-cerebrovascular disease, cancer and chronic respiratory disease.

However, to place the current position in its proper perspective, the Korean Tourism Organization (KTO) website is carrying a health guidelines notice headed up ‘Advised Preventive and Corrective Measures for Safe travel in Korea’. This emphasises that the World Health Organization (WHO) is not recommending any travel restrictions to South Korea at present. It also advises that there are also 24/7 multi-language free telephone hotlines for any tourists to voice any concerns or ask any questions.

Despite the adverse publicity related to MERS both inside and outside of South Korea, the number of tourists who have cancelled trips altogether so far is still below 150,000, according to the KTO, with most of those nationalities comprising Mainland Chinese, Hong Kong nationals and Taiwanese.



World Health Organization Director General Dr Margaret Chan addressed a packed press conference in Seoul last week where she said the risk of the MERS virus spreading to the general public is considered low. But she also warned that the government must act quickly on any signs of increased transmission. *[The South Korean Government has come under heavy local media criticism for being slow off the mark in this respect-Ed].*

WHO SAYS RISK TO GENERAL PUBLIC IS LOW

Considering the adverse publicity, this relatively moderate number is reassuring for South Korea's tourist industry for now. However, more cancellations will surely add to the numbers until there is more positive news filtering through to the aforementioned countries who traditionally provide the bulk of South Korea's tourists principally China (*6.1m visitors to South Korea last year-Ed*).

In reality, the short to medium-term prognosis actually looks very encouraging and especially following last Thursday's press conference in Seoul. WHO Director General Dr Margaret Chan presented the facts as she sees them in characteristically calm and factual fashion. Most importantly, she said it is the continued opinion and conclusion of the WHO's Emergency Committee and experts that the MERS outbreak in South Korea 'does not constitute a public health emergency of international concern'.



Routine temperature testing of passengers for MERS at Hong Kong International Airport, where sensitivity to virus outbreaks is obviously very high. *[This follows the terrible SARS outbreak in 2002 which led to 774 deaths - with the majority in Hong Kong - after the virus spread to 37 countries before being declared eradicated by January 2003-Ed].*

She said: "The risk of MERS virus to the general public is considered low as long as transmission is occurring in a confined setting, like in a health facility. Even if transmission spills over into the general community, such cases are not likely to sustain further transmission. But the government must act on them very quickly to intensify investigation."

Meanwhile, the WHO's official position on foreign travel remains consistent and unchanged: "WHO does not advise special screening at points of entry with regard to this event, nor does it currently recommend the application of any travel or trade restrictions."

[For more information from the South Korean Ministry of Health & Welfare, click here:

http://english.mw.go.kr/front_eng/sg/ssg0111vw.jsp?PAR_MENU_ID=1001&MENU_ID=100111&page=1&CNT_SEQ=323640].