

Saudi announces four new deaths from MERS virus (Update)

17 June 2013

Four people have died from the MERS virus in Saudi Arabia, bringing the death toll from the SARS-like virus in the kingdom to 32, the health ministry said on its website Monday.

Two people died in the western city of Taif and the other two were pronounced dead in Eastern Province, where most cases have been registered, said the ministry.

The ministry announced three more confirmed cases of people in Saudi Arabia infected with the virus, which the World Health Organisation has dubbed the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus, or MERS.

One case of infection was in Eastern Province and another in the capital Riyadh, while the third was of a two-year-old boy in the western city of Jeddah who was suffering from a "chronic" lung problem.

The other two cases are of a 63-year-old woman suffering from several chronic diseases and a 42-year-old man with chronic asthma, it said.

The ministry said the total number of MERS infections in the kingdom now stood at 49, including the 32 fatalities.

The World Health Organisation announced Friday that the global death toll from MERS had reached 33, with 28 of them in the kingdom.

It had said 58 laboratory-confirmed cases were announced worldwide, the majority of them in Saudi Arabia.

The virus is a member of the coronavirus family, which includes the pathogen that causes Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS).

SARS sparked global panic in 2003 after it jumped to humans from animals in Asia and killed 800 people.

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

Scientists at the Erasmus medical centre in the Dutch city of Rotterdam have pointed to bats as a natural source for the virus.

Health officials have expressed concern about the high proportion of deaths relative to cases, warning that MERS could spark a new global crisis if it mutates into a form that spreads more easily.

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