

Malaysia quarantines 64 villagers over MERS virus

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Malaysia has quarantined 64 people in a southern village after one of its residents become the country's first person to die of a respiratory illness that is spreading from the Middle East, local media reported Thursday.

At least 71 people have died from the so-called Middle East Respiratory Syndrome, or MERS, out of more than 200 infections in the worst-hit country, Saudi Arabia.

The first fatality in Muslim-majority Malaysia—a 54-year-old man—died in hospital in the southern state of Johor on Sunday.

He had developed a fever, cough and [breathing difficulties](#) after returning from a pilgrimage to Saudi Arabia's holy city of Mecca on March 29.

Health authorities screened some 100 people from the man's village, Kampung Bintang, in Johor on Thursday to check for more infections, The Star newspaper said, quoting Ayub Rahmat, a state lawmaker in charge of health.

Sixty-four of them will be quarantined for a week after showing possible symptoms.

"This is the first such case in Malaysia, and we take this matter seriously. That is why we are taking steps to screen the villagers to prevent the virus from spreading," Ayub was quoting as saying.

Health authorities could not immediately be reached for further details.

In the Philippines Thursday, officials asked more than 400 passengers who shared an airline flight with a man infected with the MERS virus to check in with the health department immediately.

The move was a precautionary measure to ensure none of the 418 passengers were infected by the man, who has since been quarantined along with

his family, a health official said.

He had returned from the Middle East on the flight.

MERS is considered a deadlier but less-easily transmitted cousin of the SARS virus that erupted in Asia in 2003 and infected 8,273 people, killing nearly 800.

The MERS outbreak was initially concentrated in the eastern region of Saudi Arabia but has now spread to other areas of the country and abroad.

Experts are still struggling to understand MERS, for which there is no known vaccine.

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