

# MERS outbreak exposes South Korean government's lack of preparation

By Ben McGrath  
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A Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) outbreak in South Korea has resulted in more than two dozen deaths and caused widespread concern among the population. As of the weekend, 169 people had been diagnosed with the disease and more than 4,000 others had been ordered to remain quarantined. President Park Geun-hye's government has come under fire for its handling of the situation.

By June 20, 25 people had died after contracting MERS. Three new cases were reported the same day. At the same time, the World Health Organization (WHO) indicated that health officials were getting the virus under control.

WHO director Margaret Chan, who travelled to South Korea with a team of specialists, met with Foreign Minister Yun Byeong-se on June 18. "My team left last week and I got a very good report that the government has really stepped up and gave a very robust and strong response, and we began to see the cases coming down," Chan said. Since the outbreak began, over 8,800 people have been quarantined and released without showing signs of the illness.

MERS was first identified in 2012 in Saudi Arabia. Globally, there had been 1,292 confirmed cases and 458 deaths as of June 16, according to WHO. MERS is a coronavirus, a family of viruses that includes the common cold and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS). While it is unknown exactly how the virus is contracted, it is believed that camels may be responsible for passing MERS onto humans. The virus has no known cure or vaccine.

Much about the virus is still unknown, but it is recommended that those with compromised immune systems take particular precautions should they be at risk of exposure, as severe complications can arise from MERS infections.

The current MERS outbreak in South Korea is the largest outside Saudi Arabia. The disease was first diagnosed on May 20 in a 68-year-old man who had returned to South Korea from Bahrain earlier in the month following a business trip.

Concern over the virus led to school closures and a general decrease in public activities. Much of this was due to the government's failure to have in place adequate measures to deal with such outbreaks.

Opposition politicians, led by the New Politics Alliance for Democracy (NPAD), have seized on these concerns, labeling the government incompetent for not setting up a "control tower," that is, a government body, to oversee the handling of the situation. The NPAD mayor of Seoul, Park Won-soon, condemned the government at a press conference on June 4, saying: "We have entered a crisis and this means that the central control tower to combat MERS has collapsed." Park is also a presidential hopeful in the 2017 election.

The government attempted to ward off criticism of its actions after President Park's approval rating fell to 33 percent. Park even cancelled a trip to the United States for a summit with President Obama, which has yet to be rescheduled. Prime Minister Hwang Gyo-an, only recently installed, stated on June 19: "I feel sorry as a newly-appointed prime minister for the insufficiency in the government's initial response, which is directly related to the public safety."

The government's response, however, is not simply due to the "incompetence" of individuals or even an entire government, as the parliamentary opposition would have people believe. Fundamentally, it is a result of the capitalist profit system—which the NPAD defends just as ardently as the government.

Nearly half of all the MERS cases in South Korea have been traced to the Samsung Medical Center in

Seoul, regarded as the country's top hospital. Built in 1994 by the Samsung chaebol—a family-owned conglomerate—the hospital caters to the wealthy, including Lee Kun-hee, head of Samsung and the richest man in South Korea, who is currently a patient at the hospital after suffering a heart attack last year.

The Samsung hospital failed to identify a 35-year-old man exhibiting symptoms, now known as MERS patient 14, allowing him to spend three days in an overcrowded emergency room and passing on the virus to those around him. The *Chosun Ilbo* wrote in an editorial recently: “It’s fair to say that their tendency to put profit and efficiency before public health prevented them from taking more decisive pre-emptive steps to contain the virus.”

The MERS outbreak has also highlighted the sharp differences in access to the medical treatment enjoyed by the upper classes and the substandard care available to the working class.

The government has attempted to deflect blame onto patients and those who defied orders to self-quarantine themselves in their homes. However, potentially infected individuals were provided no support measures. Without access to food and other provisions, many undoubtedly left their homes to procure them.

Yu Hye-ji spoke to the *Korea Herald* after her mother received a text message from a hospital in Seoul informing her mother that she had potentially come into contact with MERS and to wait for a phone call with further instructions. “Nearly an hour passed, but my mother’s phone did not ring. I had to phone the hospital to find out the situation,” Yu said.

A government official who checked in with the family failed to provide any daily necessities. Yu, whose family was ordered to stay quarantined in their home, admonished the government: “When I asked how we can feed ourselves and deal with the garbage without stepping outside, the government official kept saying ‘We cannot help it.’”

On June 22, officials in Thailand announced that the first case of MERS in that country had been diagnosed, indicating that the outbreak may spread across Asia.

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