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Rising Saudi death toll from MERS fuels public fear

JEDDAH: The MERS death toll in Saudi Arabia neared 100 this weekend as the authorities scrambled to reassure an increasingly edgy population in the country worst-hit by the infectious coronavirus.

Public fears have been fuelled by a rapid rise in the number of fatalities from the respiratory infection, with 31 people dying this month – almost a third of the 94 deaths registered since the virus emerged in April 2012.

A 63-year-old woman, who had also suffered chronic illness, died of the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome on Saturday in the western city of Jeddah, and a 78-year-old man died of MERS in Riyadh, the health ministry said yesterday.

It said the total number of cases

diagnosed since the virus was first recorded in the kingdom has reached 323, representing the bulk of infections registered globally.

Experts are still struggling to understand MERS, for which there is no known vaccine. It is considered a deadlier but less-transmissible cousin of the SARS virus which erupted in Asia in 2003 and infected 8,273 people, nine percent of whom died.

Panic over its spread among medical staff in the western city of Jeddah led to the temporary closure of a main hospital's emergency room. – AFP

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