MANILA, 10 June 2015 - A joint mission by the World Health Organization and the Republic of Korea's Ministry of Health and Welfare to review the situation regarding the outbreak of Middle East respiratory syndrome coronavirus (MERS CoV) in the Republic of Korea, has begun its work with an open and candid exchange of information and experience. Initial recommendations provided by the joint mission have been welcomed by the government.

The mission, which began yesterday in Seoul, is assessing the epidemiological pattern of MERS CoV in the Republic of Korea as well as the characteristics of the virus and clinical features. It is also reviewing the public health measures implemented to date.

Dr Keiji Fukuda, WHO Assistant Director-General for Health Security, who is co-leading the mission together with Dr Jong-Koo Lee, Director, Center for Global Medicine, Seoul National University, said that interactions in early discussions had been excellent. “The exchange of information and experience has included the provision of detailed information about the outbreak and the control measures that have been put into place, as well as discussion of existing challenges,” he said.

Dr Fukuda said that current efforts to control the outbreak and prevent further spread are being intensified. WHO has been working closely with the Ministry of Health and Welfare and the Korea Centres for Disease Control and Prevention on response measures since the outbreak began.

There have been 108 confirmed cases of MERS CoV (including 1 confirmed case in China) reported in the Republic of Korea so far, with 9 deaths. Whenever an emerging pathogen like the MERS virus appears in a new setting, for example, in a new country, a timely and thorough investigation is critical, particularly to assess whether the virus and its transmission are changing, and to ensure implementation of the most appropriate control strategies.

The evidence presented thus far suggests that the pattern of the outbreak in the Republic of Korea may be similar to MERS outbreaks that have taken place in health care facilities in the Middle East. However, the situation is rapidly evolving and investigations are ongoing.

The initial recommendations made today by the joint mission are:

- Infection prevention and control measures should immediately be strengthened in all facilities across the country.
- All patients presenting with fever or respiratory symptoms should be asked about: contact with a MERS patient; visits to a health care facility where a MERS patient has been treated; and history of travel to the Middle East in the 14 days before symptom onset. Any patient with positive responses should be promptly reported to public health authorities and managed as a suspected case while the diagnosis is being confirmed.
- Close contacts of MERS cases should not travel during the period when they are being monitored for the development of symptoms.
- Strong consideration should be given to re-opening schools, as schools have not been linked to transmission of MERS-CoV in the Republic of Korea or elsewhere.

The joint mission will end its in-country visit on Saturday 13 June 2015.