

Virus Outbreak: Belgian suspected of local infection

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Minister of Health and Welfare Chen Shih-chung speaks at a Central Epidemic Command Center briefing in Taipei yesterday. □

Photo courtesy of the Central Epidemic Command Center via CNA

The government is considering tightening mask-wearing rules again in light of a potential domestic COVID-19 infection, Minister of Health and Welfare Chen Shih-chung (陳時中) said yesterday.

The Central Epidemic Command Center (CECC) confirmed seven new COVID-19 cases, six of which are imported.

The other case involves a Belgian engineer who entered Taiwan on May 3 and remained in quarantine until May 17, said Chen, who heads the CECC.

Although the source of infection has yet to be identified, the case could end the nation's record of not having any domestic cases in the previous 110 days.

The Belgian, in his 20s, is a technician working on an offshore wind project in Changhua County.

He underwent COVID-19 testing to be able to return to his native country, Chen said.

The man tested positive in two polymerase chain reaction (PCR) tests, with cycle threshold values of 34 and 33, which Chen described as a “weak positive,” but still in the positive range for a disease considered to have an incubation period of two to 14 days.

The man was also tested for antibodies, Chen said, adding that his IgM — the first antibody the

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body makes when it fights a new infection — was negative, while IgG was “strongly positive.”

According to a US Federal Drug Administration fact sheet dated June 12, IgG antibodies generally start appearing about seven to 10 days after infection and often indicate a past infection.

Chen said the case has not yet been classified as an imported or domestic case, because if the man’s IgM is negative and IgG is positive, he might have been infected a long time ago.

The Belgian has been put in an isolation ward in a hospital and 89 people who had come into close contact with him are being monitored, Chen said, adding that 82 of them are under home quarantine, while the other seven are required to monitor their own health.

The Belgian had followed the rules and wore a mask on public transport, but had often gone outdoors, where he sometimes took his mask off, Chen said.

Since his movements are clear, the CECC does not plan to make them public, he said.

Five of the imported cases, men aged between 20 and 80, are from the Philippines, while the other is from Guatemala, Chen said.

They entered the nation from July 15 to Thursday and started to exhibit symptoms from July 10 to Friday, he said.

The new cases raised the nation’s total number of confirmed cases to 474 — 382 imported and 55 domestic cases, as well as 36 cases from the navy’s “Friendship Flotilla” and one case that needs further investigation.

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With the pandemic raging overseas, Chen reminded Taiwanese to keep their guard up and always wear a mask when they are indoors — for example in theaters, karaoke bars, elevators and study centers.

He also urged people to wash their hands frequently and practice social distancing.

The government would maintain strict border controls, he said, adding that the nation is still safe from the risk of community outbreaks.

“If 80 percent of people often wear masks, the nation would be very safe. If only 70 percent of people did, there could be a problem, but right now the rate is under 30 percent,” he said, reiterating the importance of wearing masks indoors.

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