

UPDATE1 -- North Korea closes borders to tourists due to Ebola fears

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USPA News - North Korea will temporarily bar all foreign tourists from entering the country to prevent an outbreak of the deadly Ebola virus, operators of tours to the reclusive country said Thursday. Delegations for diplomats and other official business will not be affected.

Koryo Tours and Young Pioneer Tours, two of the few independent travel groups that organize trips to North Korea, both said they had been notified by its partners in Pyongyang that North Korea would stop accepting foreign tourists from Friday. It is unclear how long the restrictions will stay in place. "Unfortunately, our partners in Pyongyang announced to us today that all tourists would be prevented from traveling to the DPRK as of Friday," said Nick Bonner, founder of Beijing-based Koryo Tours. "However, the information we have is that other delegations, such as those traveling on official business, would still be allowed to enter the country, despite the closure of borders to international tourists." Bonner said Koryo Tours has three tours scheduled for November and December but expressed hope that the restrictions would be lifted in time. "We are working hard to resolve this situation and hope to have this travel restriction lifted at the earliest opportunity so those booked with us are unaffected," he said. Koryo Tours, which takes around 3,200 tourists to North Korea each year, said it would provide a full refund if the company is forced to cancel the tours. North Korea's state-run Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) did not mention a closure of its borders to tourists in a dispatch on Thursday, but KCNA said the government was taking preventive measures in the capital Pyongyang and across the country to prevent a possible outbreak of Ebola. It said authorities were working to inform the public about how the disease is spread. "Travelers and materials undergo more thorough-going check and quarantine at airfields, trading ports and border railway stations than ever before," KCNA said in a news dispatch. "The public health organs are regularly examining all people in order to rapidly confirm people suspicious of having contracted the disease and taking measures to treat them." Thursday's news comes just months after Korea International Travel Agency head Ham Jin said that the number of foreign tourists entering North Korea had jumped by 20 percent during the first half of 2014. The vast majority of foreign tourists are from China, estimated to be in the hundreds of thousands a year, but the number of Westerners has also increased in recent years. North Korea briefly closed its borders in May 2003 to prevent the spread of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) from neighboring China, which saw thousands of cases and hundreds of deaths over the course of the 2002-2003 outbreak. North Korea never reported any case of SARS but health experts said an outbreak could have wrecked havoc in the country, which has a poor medical infrastructure. The current Ebola outbreak in West Africa is believed to have started in Guinea in December 2013 but was not detected until March, after which it spread to Liberia, Sierra Leone and Nigeria. The outbreak features the Zaire strain of the Ebola virus, which is considered to be the most aggressive and deadly strain, having killed up to 9 out of 10 infected in previous outbreaks. As of October 19, at least 9,936 people have been infected with Ebola since the outbreak began, including 4,877 people who have died of the disease, according to health authorities in the countries involved. Liberia has been the worst hit country with at least 4,665 cases including 2,705 deaths, but authorities believe the actual figures are far higher. Ebola is a highly infectious disease and kills its victims in a very short time. Signs and symptoms include high grade fever, vomiting, diarrhea, abdominal pain, headache, measles-like rash, red eyes and, in some cases, bleeding from body openings. The ongoing outbreak is the worst ever of its kind and coincides with an unrelated Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The virus, for which there is no cure or vaccine, can spread through direct contact with body fluids such as saliva, blood, stool, vomit, urine and sweat but also through soiled linen used by an infected person. It can also spread by using skin piercing instruments previously used by an infected person or by touching the body of a person who died of Ebola. It is not airborne.

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