

Saudi take steps to thwart epidemic at hajj: report

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Saudi Arabia has taken measures to deal with any epidemic that may break out during the annual hajj pilgrimage, a minister said in remarks published Monday, stressing that the spread of a mystery illness from the same family as the deadly SARS virus was "limited."

The kingdom has taken "[preventive measures](#) towards pilgrims ... and has made practical and scientific arrangements to deal with any epidemic that might be discovered," Health Minister Abdullah al-Rabeeah was quoted as saying in Al-Hayat daily.

Pilgrims in their thousands have begun arriving in the kingdom for this month's hajj, one of the five pillars of Islam which must be performed at least once in a lifetime by all Muslims who are able to do so.

The Geneva-based [World Health Organisation](#) (WHO) has identified a virus which caused the death of a Saudi national as being of the coronavirus family.

It has also left a Qatari man seriously ill in a London hospital after he was transferred there from Doha earlier last month, the WHO said, adding that he had previously been in Saudi Arabia.

The two cases occurred three months apart in June and September, said the WHO, stressing that the illness is not [Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome](#) which swept out of China in 2003, killing more than 800 people worldwide.

What sets the [new virus](#) apart from SARS, the UN health agency added, is that it causes rapid [kidney failure](#).

The WHO has said it is advising Saudi Arabia ahead of the hajj.

"The spread of the coronavirus which has lately registered two cases is still limited," Rabeeah said.

He said the "the virus has no vaccine on a global level and has no treatment," but added that the tens of thousands of pilgrims who have already arrived in the kingdom for the world's largest annual religious gathering had not been touched by any epidemics.

A Danish hospital said in August it had isolated five people with symptoms of a viral respiratory illness pending the result of tests.

Odense University hospital said those admitted were a family of four where the father had been to Saudi Arabia, and an unrelated person who had been to Qatar.

Two of the patients were children under five.

Last year, nearly three million Muslim pilgrims performed the hajj.

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