

WHO holds off raising MERS alert level as Muslim hajj looms

July 17 2013, by Jonathan Fowler

The World Health Organization on Wednesday held off from calling for travel restrictions related to the MERS virus striking Saudi Arabia as the kingdom braces for the Muslim hajj pilgrimage.

In a statement following a session of the UN health agency's emergency committee—whose rarity underlined global concerns about MERS—the WHO said there was currently no reason to step up its level of alert.

The meeting came amid mounting concern over the potential impact of the annual hajj in October, when millions of people will head to Islam's two holiest sites of Mecca and Medina, providing a possible means for MERS to spread around the globe.

"It is the unanimous decision of the committee that, with the information now available, and using a risk-assessment approach, the conditions for a [public health emergency](#) of international concern have not at present been met," it said.

The WHO's stance so far has been that countries should remain vigilant, monitoring unusual [respiratory infection](#) patterns, notably if patients have been to the Middle East.

However, the committee also said the WHO should help nations boost surveillance and laboratory capacity and inform the public about how to reduce the risks of infection, for example via good hygiene.

While the WHO did not call for outright travel and trade restrictions, its [health security](#) chief Keiji Fukuda said it was poised to issue general recommendations.

"We do recognise that this is a risk for travellers and that there are certain steps that individual travellers and countries can take, for example for people who have serious medical conditions," he told reporters.

On Saturday, Saudi [health authorities](#) urged the elderly and chronically ill, as well as children and pregnant women, not to perform the hajj.

Officials in France, which has a large Muslim community, meanwhile said they had been informed that such individuals would not get Saudi visas.

Fukuda said that such moves were a national matter.

The emergency meeting took the form of a telephone conference of officials from affected countries and global experts, with the goal of advising WHO director general Margaret Chan.

"They're not saying this is unimportant, they're not saying we can now just move on to other things," said Fukuda, pressed on the decision not to declare an emergency.

"There's clearly a concern out there about this," he said, while asking: "If the director general goes ahead and declares an emergency, is it going to be helpful?"

MERS, short for Middle East Respiratory Syndrome coronavirus, claimed its first victim in Saudi Arabia in June 2012.

Since then, a total of 82 cases have been recorded worldwide, in countries including Jordan, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, Tunisia, Britain, France and Italy.

Saudi Arabia, however, has borne the brunt, with 65 cases—and 38 of the 45 confirmed MERS deaths.

Experts are struggling to understand MERS, for which there is no vaccine.

It does not appear to spread easily but currently has an extremely high fatality rate of 55 percent.

It is a cousin of SARS, which erupted in Asia in 2003 and infected 8,273 people, nine percent of whom died.

SARS-panic, plus restrictions on travel and public gatherings, sowed economic havoc in affected countries.

Like SARS, MERS is thought to have jumped from animals to humans, and shares the former's flu-like symptoms—but differs by causing kidney failure.

The last WHO emergency meeting was during the 2009 H1N1 influenza outbreak, which is believed to have claimed tens of thousands of lives, raising fears of a pandemic like Spanish Flu, which killed millions after World War I.

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