

Prudence mixes with fatalism over MERS at hajj

October 11 2013, by Omar Hasan

Mohammed Shuaib wears a mask as he walks amid a flood of Muslims arriving for the hajj, but his wariness about the deadly MERS virus that has struck Saudi Arabia doesn't seem to be widely shared.

"Prevention is better than cure," said the 67-year-old Algerian pensioner as he removed his mask to speak to AFP after performing noon prayers at the Grand Mosque in Mecca.

But the overwhelming majority of those around him have no masks, and some said they never even heard of the MERS [coronavirus](#), which has claimed 60 lives worldwide, 51 of them in Saudi Arabia.

The latest two Saudi victims were announced on Thursday.

"We heard that the coronavirus is deadly and people in this case should protect themselves," said Shuaib, accompanied by his nephew, who also wore a mask.

"I obtained the mask from Algerian authorities, who also briefed pilgrims about the disease," he said.

The hajj, the largest annual gathering in the world, starts on Sunday and ends on October 18, with about two million pilgrims expected from Saudi Arabia and around the world.

The fact the kingdom accounts for the overwhelming majority of cases

has raised concerns about the hajj to Mecca, Islam's holiest site. Some fear pilgrims could be infected and return to their homelands carrying the virus.

But the authorities have said they are optimistic the hajj will pass without incident, given Muslims also go on lesser pilgrimages at other times of the year and there has been no problem.

This year's minor pilgrimage season, or Umrah, during the fasting month of Ramadan in July-August passed off without any MERS outbreak even though millions of Muslims took part.

And on Thursday, Saudi Health Minister Abdullah al-Rabia was quoted as saying no cases of the virus had been recorded at this year's event.

"So far, no case for any epidemic has been recorded among the pilgrims, especially the coronavirus," media quoted him as saying.

But to be on the safe side, the minister said precautions against the outbreak of any disease, especially MERS, have been beefed up this year with strict measures.

Health employees have been strictly instructed to isolate any suspected case and carry out the necessary laboratory tests to ensure the safety of pilgrims.

The minister said up to 600 public health employees wearing [face masks](#) were deployed at Jeddah international airport to screen arriving pilgrims and ensure they had the necessary vaccinations, mainly shots against influenza and meningitis.

Immigration officers at the airport, the main entry point for pilgrims from abroad, and other staff also wore masks as did most of the soldiers

manning road blocks to prevent illegal pilgrims.

Riyadh has also urged the elderly and chronically ill, who are particularly susceptible to MERS, to avoid the hajj and have advised pilgrims to wear face masks.

Even so, most of the pilgrims interviewed seemed unmoved over the disease and were not wearing masks.

"We depend on God," said middle-aged Ahmad Mahmoud from Egypt as he walked without a mask in a sea of people near the Grand Mosque, Islam's holiest shrine.

Mahmoud said he was given a mask at the airport and another when he arrived at the hotel and will wear it later.

Harris Zawawi from Malaysia was wearing a mask, but said it was not specifically against the coronavirus, "which I did not hear about."

"It is to protect me from contagious diseases in general as I was advised by Malaysian hajj authorities," said Zawawi, who is performing the hajj for the second time.

It appears that the large number of [pilgrims](#) not wearing the [masks](#) were either unaware of MERS or just being careless.

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

It is considered a deadlier but less-transmissible cousin of the SARS virus that erupted in Asia in 2003 and infected 8,273 people, nine percent of whom died, and sowed economic chaos.

Like SARS, its is believed to have jumped from animals to humans. It shares the former's flu-like symptoms, but differs by also causing kidney failure.

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