

Two die of MERS in Saudi capital ahead of annual hajj (Update)

October 10 2013

Two Saudis have died in Riyadh after they contracted the MERS virus, health authorities announced Thursday, as the kingdom prepares to host some two million Muslim pilgrims for the annual hajj.

The two men, aged 78 and 55, had also suffered from other chronic diseases, the ministry said on its website. It did not specify when the deaths occurred.

Meanwhile, authorities recorded two more infections bringing to 119, the number of people infected in the kingdom since the disease first appeared in Saudi Arabia in September 2012, the ministry said.

The MERS virus has so far claimed 58 lives worldwide, with the greatest number of deaths from the respiratory disease—51—in Saudi Arabia itself, including the latest two.

Local media on Thursday quoted Saudi Health Minister Abdullah al-Rabia as saying that authorities have not yet recorded any MERS cases among pilgrims arriving from all over the world ahead of the hajj that begins Sunday.

"So far, no case of any epidemic has been recorded among the pilgrims, especially the coronavirus," Rabia said.

The hajj is one of the largest gatherings in the world, and there are fears that pilgrims, expected to reach two million this year, could be infected

and return to their homelands carrying the virus.

The hajj takes place in the holy city of Mecca, located about 800 kilometres (494 miles) west of Riyadh.

However, the authorities have said they are optimistic that the hajj will pass off without any outbreak, given that Muslims also go on lower-level pilgrimages throughout the year and there has been no mass spread of MERS.

Riyadh has, however, urged the elderly and chronically ill to avoid the hajj. Authorities have also advised pilgrims to wear face masks.

Experts are struggling to understand MERS, for which there is 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, MERS 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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