

WHO: Basic hygiene can help prevent MERS spread

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A World Health Organization official on Thursday urged millions of Muslims making the pilgrimage to Mecca, Saudi Arabia, to exercise basic hygiene as mass gatherings pose risks of spreading the Middle East respiratory syndrome.

The U.N. agency has recorded 827 cases of MERS and 287 deaths, mostly in Saudi Arabia. The virus is believed primarily acquired through contact with camels and spread among humans through body fluids and droplets.

Hand washing and keeping away from coughing people are simple ways to prevent the virus' spread, said Mark Jacobs, WHO Western Pacific region director for communicable diseases.

He said there's a low chance of its spread in most settings, but health workers caring for MERS patients, people exposed to camels and those in large gatherings are at some risk. "Any gathering of large numbers of people can produce, can result, in risks of any sort of infectious diseases," he added.

Jacobs said cases of MERS have been found in a number of countries but they are linked to cases in a small number of countries in the Arabian peninsula.

"What we have been seeing is outbreaks in those countries but the occasional case in a traveler," he said. Unless the virus changes, the risk

of spread in the Asia-Pacific region is small, he said.

Philippine health authorities last week urged Muslim Filipinos, especially the elderly and those with chronic ailments, to postpone their annual pilgrimage to Mecca because of MERS worries. About 6,500 Filipinos are expected to join the October pilgrimage.

Mecca sees a constant stream of pilgrims throughout the year from around the world, and their numbers swell during the holy month of Ramadan, which begins in late June. The hajj pilgrimage—which Islam says is a duty of all able-bodied Muslims to perform once in their lives—brings even more gigantic crowds: Some 2 million pilgrims from all over the world, packed into the close quarters as they visit the Kaaba, Islam's holiest site, and other locations in and around Mecca for a period of about five days. This year, hajj starts in early October.

Since the coronavirus was first discovered in 2012, there have been two annual hajj pilgrimages to the city, and neither saw instances of pilgrims being infected.

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