

Filipino Muslims urged to delay hajj due to MERS

July 3 2014



Philippine Health Secretary Enrique Ona gestures during a news conference on the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome-Corona virus (MERS-Cov) which might affect the Muslims' pilgrimage to Mecca in Saudi Arabia known as Hajj, Thursday, July 3, 2014 in Manila, Philippines. Philippine health authorities are urging Muslim Filipinos to postpone their pilgrimage to Mecca in Saudi Arabia due to worries about the Middle East respiratory syndrome virus. (AP Photo/Bullit Marquez)

Philippine health authorities urged Muslim Filipinos Thursday to postpone their annual pilgrimage to Mecca in Saudi Arabia due to worries about an often deadly respiratory virus.

The World Health Organization has recorded 824 confirmed cases of MERS, or the Middle East respiratory syndrome, as of July 2, including at least 286 related deaths. Most cases have occurred in Saudi Arabia, and the virus is believed primarily acquired through contact with camels.

So far, Mecca has seen fewer cases than other parts of Saudi Arabia. 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.

"We are strongly recommending and advising our Muslim brothers to defer ... their hajj pilgrimage this year for, maybe, next year," Health Secretary Enrique Ona told reporters.

About 6,500 Filipinos are expected to join the October pilgrimage, part of some 2 million Muslims from all over the world.

Dimapuno Datu-Ramos from the government's Commission on Muslim Filipinos said those who insist on going needed to secure a medical certificate to show they are fit for the journey.

Ona said that health workers will monitor Filipinos in each of the pilgrimage flights headed to and from Mecca.

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