

UN: MERS deadly but most cases are preventable

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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)

Infection rates for the Middle East respiratory syndrome are slowing and scientists hope to know enough in a year or so to be able to stop the dangerous coronavirus from spreading further internationally, a top U.N. health official says.

Most of the 824 confirmed cases of MERS since 2013, including at least 286 deaths, could have been prevented, Dr. Keiji Fukuda, assistant director-general of the World Health Organization, told The Associated Press.

About 40 percent of the people who became infected have died, he said, calling that "a much higher-than-normal fatality rate" for a virus.

"If we take a look at all of the people that we know got infected (in hospitals), probably the vast majority of those people's infections could have been prevented," said Fukuda, a U.S.-trained physician and former U.N. special adviser on pandemic influenza.

On the other hand, Fukuda says WHO still doesn't understand well enough how people are getting infected in their communities.

Most of the cases have occurred in Saudi Arabia and the virus is thought to be primarily acquired through contact with camels, although he said scientists should do more to find out whether other animals might also serve as a reservoir for the virus.



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)

Saudi Arabia has greatly improved its surveillance efforts since a surge of MERS cases starting in April, Fukuda said, but added more efforts were need ahead of the Muslim pilgrimage season when millions around the world travel to the Middle East country.

Muslim pilgrims, particularly those with underlying medical problems,

should be made aware of the MERS threat and prevention measures must be put in place now because the Hajj "always has the potential for either bringing in infections or carrying out infections," Fukuda said.

Fukuda said research groups are starting to develop a vaccine but their efforts are probably years away from fruition.

He warned that, with modern air travel, a virus in one nation can easily go worldwide.

"An infected person who doesn't feel sick at the time can get on a plane and go to the U.S., can go to a European country, can go to Asia," he said. "Every country needs to be aware of what's going on."

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