



Mina, Saudi Arabia, 10 August 2019 — Authorities in Saudi Arabia are deploying a new health surveillance system to help keep people protected from communicable diseases during the annual hajj pilgrimage.

For the first time, the Global Centre for Mass Gatherings Medicines of the Saudi Ministry of Health is using the Health Early Warning System (HEWS), which ensures the early detection of and timely response to health threats and emergencies related to mass gatherings.

The new system monitors clinical reporting to identify clusters of unusual health events. Using a mixture of syndromic and indicator-based surveillance, it is well adapted to spot the diarrhoeal diseases and respiratory infections that are liable to occur during mass gatherings which may occur due to crowding, variable living conditions and poor hygiene.

Developed in 2018 by the Ministry of Health Saudi Arabia in collaboration with World Health Organization (WHO) experts, HEWS was previously tested on a lower scale during last year's hajj season and proved effective.

This year, the system is being applied electronically in 17 hospitals and 96 health facilities in vicinity of hajj areas, including Makkah, Madinah, Mina, Arafat and Mozdalefah, as of early August 2019. It is expected to help health authorities receive pre events signals and alerts, take immediate action and thus contribute to avoiding or reducing morbidity and mortality rates. It will also help policy-makers to better plan health interventions and services for future hajj seasons.

The news so far this year has been encouraging. A few days after the arrival of pilgrims for the hajj, several signals had been received through HEWS, but investigation had determined that no exceptional interventions were required. Most of the cases were diagnosed as acute febrile syndrome with rash or with neuroglial manifestation while a few were diagnosed as acute jaundice.

The annual Islamic hajj pilgrimage is one of the world's largest mass gathering events, bringing together around 2.3 million people from across the globe in the same place at the same time.

Pilgrims flocked to Mina on Friday 9 August 2019 to begin the official rituals of Hajj, followed by ascending to the holy mountain of Arafat to perform the main hajj ritual.

Saudi health authorities have allocated 30 000 health professionals from various disciplines to provide health care for pilgrims through a network of hospitals, health centres, mobile clinics, ambulances and air medical evacuation. They initiated awareness-raising campaigns before and during the hajj and arranged with other countries to implement health screening/awareness before the start of the hajj season.

Saudi Arabia has welcomed more than 1.8 million pilgrims from abroad so far through its major air, sea and land crossings. More pilgrims are expected before ascending to Arafat, in addition to around 500 000 Saudi and expatriate domestic pilgrims.

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