



Upon an invitation from Saudi Arabia, a team from the WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean, coordinated by the pandemic and epidemic disease programme, will participate in a technical mission to observe, guide and advise on appropriate public health preparedness measures for prevention of any outbreak during the coming hajj 1434 H/2013.

This year's hajj (1434 H) has already raised unprecedented global attention in view of the public health concerns for international spread of Middle East Respiratory Syndrome coronavirus (MERS-CoV), as the majority of global cases of MERS-CoV (110 cases out of a total of 132 reported across the globe) have been reported from the Kingdom over the last year where the pilgrims will be visiting.

It is expected that WHO's collaboration this year with the Ministry of Health of Saudi Arabia will help in early detection of any cluster amongst the pilgrims, initiate rapid control measures for preventing spread that will effectively stop any international spread of MERS-CoV when the pilgrims start returning to their own countries after the hajj.

The team from WHO, led by a senior communicable disease expert, will be based in Mina and Arafat during the period of hajj and will visit field hospitals in selected points of entry for pilgrims to have a first-hand idea on curative, preventive and promotive health services provided by the Kingdom to the pilgrims. The team will review, and where applicable will advise on improving, the public health surveillance systems for early detection of, and response to, any infectious disease outbreaks amongst the pilgrims and will also advise Saudi Arabia on appropriate dissemination of risk communication messages to the pilgrims in a mass gatherings event such as the hajj.

Hajj and umrah are the two of the largest and most crowded mass gathering events which is organized by the Kingdom annually. The hajj takes place every year during the twelve month of the Islamic calendar in Saudi Arabia and are attended by over 3 million people from more than 180 countries every year. It is expected that the hajj, this year, will be held sometime between 13 and 16 October. Since 2010, WHO is collaborating with the Ministry of Health in the Kingdom advising on implementing appropriate public health measures for prevention and control of epidemic prone infection diseases amongst the hajj pilgrims as well as identifying important lessons for effective surveillance and public health response to epidemic-prone infectious diseases in mass gathering situations. As a result of this collaboration, the annual Hajj has remained free from any public health event of potential concern for the last 3 years.

## **Weekly Epidemiological Monitor**

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