

11 September 2016 – More than 26 000 Saudi health staff have started providing support to pilgrims at 25 hospitals and 158 primary health care centres around the holy sites where more than 1.5 Muslims from 140 countries have begun the annual Hajj pilgrimage in Saudi Arabia.

Today, pilgrims are traveling to Mount Arafat, for what will be the main part of the pilgrimage. Rapid response teams with more than 170 ambulances are positioned there to provide urgent services should any emergency happen.

Since the start of the pilgrimage season on 5 August this year, health staff have provided more than 21 open heart surgeries, 300 catheterizations and over 1500 kidney dialyses. With temperatures soaring up to 43 °C, health staff have so far treated 49 people from heat exhaustion and sunstroke.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has been providing advice to the Ministry of Health of Saudi Arabia in their preparations for and response to any possible health event that might occur during one of the world's largest annual mass gatherings. After conducting a joint risk assessment of health threats, WHO supported the Ministry in drafting response plans for any spread of disease, outbreak of mass food poisoning, stampede incident, heatstroke, flooding, and other possible threats.

In order to better communicate with pilgrims coming from more than 140 countries, the Ministry of Health and local nongovernmental organizations have recruited 420 interpreters covering 67 languages to facilitate the exchange of information between health staff and patients on medical histories and symptoms. In addition, health education groups are visiting pilgrims to stress the

need to drink water frequently, shelter from the sun and take as much rest as possible.

For more information:

Rana Sidani, Senior Communication Officer

Mobile: +20 1099756506 E-mail: sidanir@who.int



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