The 2014 Hajj and Umrah – current recommendations

Eurosurveillance editorial team (eurosurveillance@ecdc.europa.eu)¹

1. European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) Stockholm, Sweden

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This year, the Hajj – the annual pilgrimage to Mecca, Saudi Arabia – will take place approximately during 2–7 October 2014. Umrah is a similar pilgrimage, but it can be undertaken any time during the year. In 2014, it is expected that the Ramadan period, approximately between 28 June and 28 July, will attract the largest number of Umrah pilgrims.

The congregation of so many people from different parts of the world in crowded conditions within a confined area for a short period of time presents many public health challenges. About three million pilgrims attend the Hajj every year. They travel to Saudi Arabia from more than 180 different countries, of which some 45,000 travel from the European Union (EU) and European Economic Area (EEA).

As the reported number of human cases of Middle East respiratory syndrome coronavirus (MERS-CoV) infection in the Arabian Peninsula has increased rapidly in the past months, several organisations have issued travel advice specifically related to MERS-CoV, in addition to the general Hajj and Umrah travel advice published every year. On 3 June, the World Health Organization (WHO) published travel advice on MERS-CoV for pilgrimages and actions for countries to take in preparation for, during and after Umrah and Hajj [1].

The United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) published advice on what travellers can do to protect themselves from MERS-CoV on 4 June [2]. The CDC reiterates the WHO recommendations and makes further reference to the Saudi Arabian Ministry of Health recommendation [3] that some groups should postpone travel.

The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) published an updated risk assessment on 31 May, which also contains recommendations for travellers [4].

References

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