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WHO Collaborating Centre for Research and Training in Viral Diagnostics

29th May 2014

The Secretary
Ministry of Religious Affairs
Government of Pakistan
Islamabad

Subject: **Advisory on the Prevention and Control of Middle East Respiratory Syndrome Corona Virus (MERS-CoV) during upcoming Umrah & Hajj**

Identified first in September 2012 in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) has till date affected a total of 658 individuals across the globe resulting in 204 deaths. The number of reported cases has however, risen markedly since April 2014 particularly in Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates where healthcare associated outbreaks are occurring. In the meantime, additional seven countries (Philippines, Greece, Malaysia, Netherlands, Egypt, USA and Iran) have notified imported MERS cases to the WHO.

2. The WHO-IHR Emergency Committee concerning MERS in its meeting held on May 14, 2014; has observed that the conditions for declaring MERS as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) have not yet been met. However, it was felt that the seriousness of the situation has increased in terms of public health impact.

3. In the wake of current up-surge of MERS-CoV cases in KSA, its travel associated international spread and the upcoming Umrah and Hajj seasons, it is imperative to institute effective prevention and control measures amongst Pakistani pilgrims. Emphasizing the need to have close collaboration on the pattern of Hajj 2013, the National Institute of Health, Islamabad recommends the following actions to the Ministry of Religious Affairs:

i. Pilgrims with pre-existing medical conditions such as diabetes, chronic lung disease and immunodeficiency should consult their Physicians before travelling to assess whether making the pilgrimage is advisable for them.

ii. "Health Alert Cards" preferably in local languages or Urdu having information about symptoms and prevention of MERS-CoV, be handed over to all travelers including pilgrims and flight crews traveling to & from Middle East countries.

iii. Through health education sessions conducted at each Hajji camp in collaboration with the provincial / Area Health Departments, the departing pilgrims must be informed about the following general health precautions to lower the risk of infection in general:

a) Frequent hand washing with soap and water, if soap and water are not available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
b) Avoid touching eyes, nose, and mouth after touching common surfaces/hand shake with ill persons.
c) Avoid close contact with sick people.

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d) Avoid undercooked meat or food prepared under unsanitary conditions, and wash fruits and vegetables properly before eating them;
e) Maintaining good personal hygiene;
f) Avoid unnecessary contact with farm, domestic, and wild animals, especially camels

iv. The posters based on the health education material should be made available to all departing pilgrims through the travel and tourism sectors and by placing at important / visible locations.

v. The Hajj Medical Mission should also include Surveillance and Infection Control experts. Moreover, the healthcare staff must be trained on MERS-CoV besides provision of a copy of the Guidelines developed by the National Institute of Health, Islamabad available at www.nih.org.pk .

vi. Sufficient supplies of the empiric broad spectrum antibiotics, soaps, alcohol-based sanitizers and personal protective equipment (gloves, gowns, surgical masks, N-95 respirators) should be made available to the medical mission.

vii. Pilgrims developing a significant acute respiratory illness with fever, cough or diarrhea should be advised to:

a) Cover their mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing or sneezing and discard the tissue in the trash after use
b) Minimize their contact with others to keep away from infecting them

viii. Returning pilgrims should be advised to seek immediate medical attention if they develop a significant acute respiratory illness with fever and cough during two weeks after their return.

ix. For appropriate referral and diagnosis of onboard sick travelers, the national Health Authorities must be informed along with contact information of ill passenger(s).

4. The detailed Guidelines on MERS already communicated to your good offices are also available at NIH web site www.nih.org.pk. For any further technical assistance, the Epidemic Investigation Cell of Public Health Laboratories Division, NIH may be contacted on Tel: 051-9255237 and Fax No. 051-9255575.

(Dr. Birjees Mazher Kazi)
Executive Director

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