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National Focal Point for International Health Regulations

16th July 2019

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 Hajj**

Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS) is an acute respiratory disease caused by a novel coronavirus (Middle East respiratory syndrome coronavirus, or MERS-CoV) that was first identified in Saudi Arabia during 2012. Typical MERS symptoms include fever, cough and shortness of breath while Pneumonia is also common along with gastrointestinal symptoms. Recent virological studies point towards dromedary camels being the source of virus that can also spread from ill people to close contacts while caring for or living with an infected person.

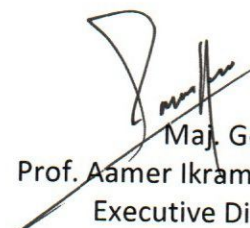
2. Since April 2012, around 2,500 cases of MERS have been reported globally with 838 deaths. Over 80% of the cases have been reported from Saudi Arabia while others have also been linked through travel to or residence in countries in and near the Arabian Peninsula.

3. Fortunately, no MERS-CoV infection has so far been detected among Pakistanis. However, keeping in view the high risk of MERS-CoV transmission during Hajj and its travel associated international spread, it is imperative to institute effective prevention and control measures during Hajj season.

4. Emphasizing the need to have close collaboration on the pattern of Hajj 2018, the National Institute of Health 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, and/or using an alcohol-based hand sanitizer
 - b. Avoid close contact with sick people

- c. Don't touch eyes, nose, and mouth after hand shake with ill Persons
 - d. Maintaining good personal hygiene;
 - e. 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 location. Pilgrims must further be advised to report to the medical mission or nearby health facility, in case they develop serious respiratory symptoms.
 - v. Train & provide the doctors in the "Hajj Medical Mission" with up to date information on MERS-CoV. The Hajj Medical Mission must also include a Surveillance and Infection Control experts.
 - vi. Sufficient supplies of the empiric broad spectrum antibiotics, soaps, alcohol-based sanitizers and personal protective equipment (gloves gowns, surgical masks, N-95 respirators) shall be made available to the medical mission.
 - vii. Pilgrims developing a significant acute respiratory illness with fever, cough or diarrhea should be advised to:
 - Cover their mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing or sneezing and discard the tissue in the trash after use
 - Minimize their contact with others to keep from infecting them
 - viii. Returning pilgrims should be advised through a leaflet 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. For any further technical assistance, the Field Epidemiology & Disease Surveillance Division, NIH may be contacted on Tel: 051-9255237 and Fax No. 051-9255575.


Maj. General
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Executive Director

Cc:

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2. Joint Secretary Hajj Mission, Ministry of Religious Affairs, Government of Pakistan
3. Director General Hajj Mission, Ministry of Religious Affairs, Government of Pakistan
4. Director General Health Services. Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Balochistan, Gilgit-Baltistan, and AJK
5. Director General Health, CDA, Islamabad
6. District Health Officer, Islamabad
7. Director Central Health Establishment, Ministry of NHSRC
8. SPS to the Minister of State for NHSRC