Cholera in Yemen and the hajj

Date: Saturday 15th July 2017
Source: Reuters

GENEVA (Reuters) - A cholera epidemic in Yemen, which has infected more than 332,000 people, could spread during the annual hajj pilgrimage in Saudi Arabia in September, although Saudi authorities are well prepared, the World Health Organization (WHO) said on Friday.

The pilgrimage draws 2-4 million Muslims every year, including 1.5-2 million foreigners, raising the risk from diseases such as dengue, yellow fever, Zika virus and meningococcal disease as well as cholera, the WHO said.

"The current highly spreading outbreak of cholera in Yemen, as well as in some African countries, may represent a serious risk to all pilgrims during the hajj days and even after returning to their countries," a WHO bulletin said.

Dominique Legros, a WHO cholera expert, said Saudi Arabia had not had a cholera outbreak in many years thanks to reinforced surveillance and rapid tests to detect cases early.

"Don’t forget that today we are speaking of Yemen but they are receiving pilgrims from a lot of endemic countries, and they managed not to have an outbreak, essentially by making sure that living conditions, access to water in particular, hygienic conditions, are in place," he told a regular U.N. briefing.

"They are well-prepared in my view."

The incubation period of the disease, which spreads through ingestion of faecal matter and causes acute watery diarrhoea, is a matter of hours. Once symptoms start, cholera can kill within hours if the patient does not get treatment.

But people with symptoms are just the tip of the iceberg because 80 percent of patients show no symptoms, Legros said.

"That’s why we advise countries against airport screening for patients. The Saudis don’t do that. It’s useless, technically speaking."

The United Nations has blamed the warring sides in Yemen and their international allies, including Saudi Arabia, for fueling the 11-week cholera outbreak, driving millions of people closer to famine, and for hindering aid access.
The WHO has rolled out an emergency treatment program, based on the vestiges of Yemen’s shattered health system, to try and catch new cases early and stop the explosive spread of the disease.

The number of new cases has continued to grow by about 6,000 per day, but the number of deaths appears to have slowed dramatically, according to Reuters analysis of WHO data.

Death rates have slumped from 20-40 in recent weeks to an average of nine per day over the past six days.

(2)  
**Date:** Friday 14th July 2017  
**Source:** Daily WHO update

From 27 April to 13 July 2017, 332,658 suspected cholera cases and 1,759 deaths (CFR: 0.5%) have been reported in 91.3% (21/23) of Yemen governorates, and 87.7% (292/333) of the districts.

**Comment** (17th July 2017)  
The cholera outbreak in Yemen is very large and still unfolding and will not be over before the hajj pilgrimage starts. The news release from Reuters cited above mention that the attack rate is declining, which we have not been able to confirm.  
Pilgrims from Yemen will be accepted by Saudi Arabia, but as pointed out in the WHO release cited by Reuters, cholera is endemic in other countries and cholera has not been detected at previous hajj pilgrimage.

It is important that returning pilgrims with diarrhea are investigated for cholera. Isolation of cholera bacteria requires special culture media (high saline content) and thus cholera may be mission of only the usual routine media for culturing pathogenic intestinal bacteria is used.

Other current threats are MERS-CoV (Middle East Resiratory Syndrome Corona Virus) (1) and multidrug-resistant bacteria (2) including colistin resistant organisms (3).


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