

Few swine flu cases among pilgrims

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Saudi Ministry of Health announced Monday that only a few swine flu cases and no deaths were reported among millions of Muslim pilgrims during the holy month of Ramadan despite fears of a massive outbreak

According to the state news agency SPA, Saudi ministry reported that just 26 cases of A(H1N1) influenza were reported in Mecca and Medina during Ramadan which ended on September 20.

Several million Saudis and foreigners had descended on Islam's two holiest cities to perform the umrah or minor pilgrimage.

Another two cases were reported in the northern and southern border regions, where many pilgrims pass on their way to Mecca from neighbouring countries, it said.

"The ministry of health continues to follow closely the disease among pilgrims and visitors from all areas through epidemiological surveillance and laboratory diagnosis of suspected cases," it said.

Epidemiologists feared a massive outbreak of swine flu among pilgrims at the peak umrah period during the fasting month.

As of September 7, when the most recent government data were released, 26 people had died of swine flu in Saudi Arabia.

But the danger was reduced by intensive surveillance preparation and warnings from Riyadh that children, the elderly and other high-risk persons should be prevented from undertaking umrah this year.

Some countries such as Egypt and Oman placed their own restrictions on umrah pilgrims to mitigate the threat.

Saudis and global health authorities are still concerned about the possibility of an outbreak during the hajj -- the annual major pilgrimage -- in late November.

Some two million foreigners and possibly as many Saudis are expected to descend on Mecca and Medina for the hajj, which takes place in the middle of the northern hemisphere's winter flu season.

Saudis are calling on hajj pilgrims to get normal flu shots and, if vaccines are available in time, specific swine flu inoculations as well.

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