



29/5 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.

Cont...P/2

