

Egypt mulls pilgrimage suspension after first swine flu death

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Published: July 20, 2009, 15:39

Cairo: The first swine flu death in Egypt has again triggered questions whether this predominantly Muslim country should delay Haj (pilgrimage) trips to Saudi Arabia.

The Ministry of Health on Sunday night reported the nation's first swine flu death of a young Egyptian woman, who passed away after her return from performing Umrah (lesser pilgrimage) in Saudi Arabia. Samah Al Sayyed, 25, had died in a Nile Delta hospital three days after her return from Saudi Arabia. Her death prompted Egyptian Minister Dr Hatem Al Gabali to call for an emergency meeting with his Arab colleagues to discuss the situation.

Around 130 Egyptians and foreigners have been diagnosed with the swine flu virus since April. Al Gabali had earlier suggested delaying the pilgrimage trips, a suggestion which has drawn opposition in this country of 80 million.

"There is no need to postpone pilgrimage due to swine flu because the virus is as normal as the common flu, if not weaker," the Egyptian Doctors' Association said in a statement.

Meanwhile, Egypt's top Muslim officials, including the Grand Mufti, said such a decision should not be made without "collective consultations" among the institutions concerned in Egypt and other Muslim countries.

Applications for performing Umrah in the lunar Islamic months of Sha'aban and Ramadan (when such journeys usually peak) have dropped by almost half compared to last year, according to the Travel Companies' Chamber. "This year's Umrah season is the worst as fears over swine flu have resulted in a sharp drop in the journeys," said Basel Al Seesi, a board member of the chamber.

The health authorities in Egypt have announced quarantining pilgrims upon their return from Saudi Arabia to check if they have contracted the virus.

"This measure has prompted would-be pilgrims to reconsider making the journey this year," added Al Sessi.

He predicted that the local travel companies would incur LE200 million in losses if pilgrimage were postponed.

Many ordinary Egyptians are, however, opposed to the idea of delaying pilgrimage. "My dream is to visit the holy Mosque in Makkah (in Saudi Arabia). I wouldn't mind if I died there," said Hamouda Al Sayyed, a 65-year-old pensioner. "I have been saving money from my pension in order to cover the cost of the Haj trip. If I died there, I would be a martyr."

Muslim clerics do not approve of this logic. "Anyone considering himself a martyr for dying while performing Umrah or Haj is a fool," said Abdul Moati Bayoumi, a member of the Islamic Research Centre, an influential arm of Al Azhar, which is the Sunni Muslim world's prestigious institution.

"Islam prohibits its followers from putting themselves at risk," Bayoumi told Gulf News. "At least people suffering from chronic diseases, pregnant women and the elderly should shun pilgrimage this year."

<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/NEWS-World-Rest-of-World-Egypt-reports-first-swine-flu-death/articleshow/4796514.cms>