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Guidelines

Mass Gathering at Shrines for Urs During COVID19

Objective

To provide guidelines to the local authorities, faith-based organizations, faith communities and local organizers of mass gatherings on education, preparedness, and response to reduce the risks of COVID-19 transmission associated with mass gatherings/ urs at shrines.

Rationale

In the context of COVID-19, mass gatherings are events that could amplify the transmission of the virus and potentially disrupt the country's response capacity. COVID-19 is transmitted from person to person through respiratory droplets and contact with contaminated surfaces, and the risk of transmission appears to be proportional to the closeness (less than 2 meter) and frequency of the interaction between an infected individual and an unaffected individual.

In Pakistan, the veneration of saints takes a festive turn during the 'urs' and constitutes one of the largest religious gatherings in the Pakistani calendar. As the anniversaries of the death of saints, the 'urs have become the focus of yearly pilgrimages. The main groups of participants at the urs include pilgrims/visitors, transgenders (khusre), religious mendicants (malangs), singers, fortune-tellers, traditional healers, etc. Mass gatherings are planned at the shrines, but in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, relevant authorities should ensure to implement prevention and control measures to reduce the risk of transmission or the potential strain on health services.

Preparations-Administrative and Logistics

Local and national health authorities are the primary source of information and advice about COVID-19 in communities. They provide information about locally mandated restrictions on the movement of people, whether gatherings are permitted and, if so, of what size.

- Establishing direct links and channels of communication between urs organizers, health authorities, local authorities looking after shrines and other relevant stakeholders.
- Establishing a clear line of command and control and enabling efficient situation analysis and decision-making specially for the crowded and high-attraction shrines.
- Modify the characteristics of the event such as venue, attendees, facilities, equipment as per requirement.
- Ensure the installment of disinfecting walk through gates at the shrines where the number of visitors are quite high.
- Ensure separate gates for entrance and exit of the visitors to avoid crowding.



- Designate the wide space for the distribution of religious foods (langar) among the visitors and ensure their seating with 2 meters distance from each other.
- Local organizers must ensure the arrangement and protocol for the people who want to offer 'charhawa' e.g. sacrifice a goat or chicken at the shrine and their adherence to it.
- Focus on the capacity of health and other relevant authorities and organizers to strengthen preparedness and response to a public health issue that occurs before, during, or after the mass gathering event.

Training of Scouts/ Volunteers

- Train the scouts/ volunteers for checking the temperature through thermal guns, identifying the symptoms of COVID19 and probe information from suspected individuals.
- All the scouts/ volunteers must wear face mask, gloves, and practice hand hygiene.
- Train them for facilitating the formation of queues, maintaining a distance of 2 meters among the visitors.
- Train them for setting up water containers and stalls of pre-packaged boxes/servings of religious foods (langar), rather than shared portions from communal containers.
- Ensure that no utensils e.g. glass, spoons or plates are shared among the attendants of the urs.
- Train them to update and distribute timely and accurate emergency communication information with the local organizers of the urs or the focal person of health care authority.
- If any of the scouts/ volunteer falls sick, they must inform the authority and stay at home.

Role of Organizers

- Ensure the availability of thermal guns at entrance and allow individuals only after checking their temperature.
- Do not allow any individual to enter the premises without face mask, provision (sale or distribution) of face masks at entry should be arranged.
- Maintain a safe distance of 2 meters (6 feet) from each other indoors as well as outdoors.
- Consider holding the urs at outdoors. If this is not possible, ensure that the indoor venue has adequate ventilation and space to accommodate the pilgrims/ visitors.
- Seating of the individuals should also be at least 2 meters (6 feet) apart. Where necessary, create and assign fixed seating to maintain safe distances.
- Ensure the presence of only 5 or 6 individuals (as per the available space) within the shrine at one time for making prayers.
- If absence of air conditioners at shrines, alternate ventilation mechanisms should be used.
- Advise people to observe physical distancing, respiratory/cough etiquette, and hand hygiene practices.
- Do not allow the individuals with cough and flu to enter the shrine.
- Ensure regular and thorough cleaning and disinfection of the venue with the chlorine solution by the designated staff.
- Keep the duration of the event to a minimum to limit contact among pilgrims/ visitors.



- Ensure availability of handwashing facilities with soap and water at the ablution sites, and/or hand rub dispensers with alcohol-based (70%) hand sanitizer at the venue.
- Advise people with higher risk of developing severe illness from COVID-19 (e.g. aged ≥ 65 years or with pre-existing medical conditions), and individuals in contact with higher-risk patients (e.g. residents in same household, long term care facility employees etc.) to not attend the urs.
- Visual reminders on action and steps to be followed by people developing symptoms of COVID19.
- Visual reminders on recommended/required use of face masks.
- Ensure provision for detecting and monitoring event-related cases of COVID-19 and protocol for the sentinel surveillance according to the local public health guidelines.
- In case attendees, organizing staff and/or scouts develop symptoms during the event, event organizers should liaise with national and local health authorities, as well with those of the participant's home city or country, and facilitate sharing of information.

Role of Pilgrims/ Visitors

The transmission of COVID 19 occurs through suspended air droplets or respiratory droplets settled on a person's hands and can be passed on to others through physical contact. To avoid this, following is recommended:

- Ensure wearing a face mask before leaving house or at the venue of shrine.
- Maintain the safe distance of 2 meters (6 feet) from each other indoors/ outdoors.
- Greet people at the entry to worship spaces with friendly words and smiles, rather than handshakes or other forms of physical contact.
- Prevent touching or kissing of devotional objects that are accustomed to communal handling. Also avoid touching or kissing the shrine (zari) instead witness the sacred icons from a distance.
- Receive a blessing from at least 1 m away and avoid the distribution of edibles through hands or drinking from a common cup.
- Consider using individual pre-packaged boxes/servings of religious or ceremonial foods (langar), rather than shared portions from communal containers.
- The pilgrims/ visitors should not be allowed to offer prayer within the shrine instead encourage them to offer the prayers in open space outside the shrine.
- Ask attendees to bring their own personal prayer rugs to place over carpets for daily prayers.
- When pilgrims/ visitors enter a site or building barefoot, shoes and sandals should be placed separately and in bags.
- Visual displays of advice on physical distancing, hand hygiene, and respiratory etiquette.

Cleaning and Disinfection

- Establish routine cleaning of shrine with disinfectant including the indoor spaces, open courtyards, and other buildings where people gather. The chance of transmission through



inanimate surfaces is less, and only in instances where an infected person coughs or sneezes on the surface, and someone else touches that surface within 2 hours after the cough or sneeze.

- Disinfect the frequently touched objects such as doorknobs, light switches, and stair railings, zari and sacred icons.
- Disinfect the public washrooms and ensure the availability of soap, running water and disinfectants.
- The preference of affinity of the chemical disinfectants, recommended concentration, surfaces to be tackled, toxicity, contact time, frequency, duration, and stability of the product should be according to the focused microorganisms. (Separate guidelines on the Cleaning & Disinfection of Environmental Surfaces)
 - Disinfect surfaces with 70% alcohol where the use of bleach is not suitable.
 - Freshly prepared 1% sodium hypochlorite is also used.

Note: The above recommendations are being regularly reviewed by the Ministry of National Health Services, Regulations & Coordination and will be updated based on the international & national recommendations and best practices.

The Ministry acknowledges the contribution of Ms. Syeda Shehirbano Akhtar and HSA/ HPSIU/ NIH team to compile these guidelines.

References:

1. CDC, Get Your Mass Gatherings or Large Community Events Ready for Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19), Interim Guidance

For more information, please contact:

HSA/ HPSIU/ NIH, PM National Health Complex, Islamabad

<http://covid.gov.pk/>

<http://nhsrcofficial.gov.pk/>

<https://www.facebook.com/NHSRCOfficial>

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