

Iran bans Ramadan umra pilgrimage as swine flu spreads

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TEHRAN (Reuters) - Iran has banned Iranians from performing the umra pilgrimage in Saudi Arabia during the holy month of Ramadan to slow spread of swine flu in the country, a health ministry official said Thursday.

The umra can be performed at any time but is popular during Ramadan, which this year starts in August.

"Iranians are banned from attending the holy places in Saudi Arabia during fasting month of Ramadan," deputy Health Minister Hassan Emami-Razavi told state television.

The H1N1 virus, commonly known as swine flu, emerged in April in the United States and Mexico, and has spread internationally. The number of Iranians infected with the virus topped 144 since late June.

"Three persons per day on average are identified as infected by the disease," another health ministry official was quoted by the Ebtekar newspaper as saying.

Iranian media reported Wednesday the first death from the H1N1 flu in the southern Island of Qeshm. The report was immediately denied by the authorities.

"The H1N1 has claimed no life in Iran yet," Health Minister Kamran Baqeri-Lankarani told state television.

Around 3 million Muslim pilgrims from over 160 countries head for the holy city of Mecca in western Saudi Arabia each year in one of the world's biggest religious gatherings.

The main hajj pilgrimage will this year take place in November. Saudi Arabia in June called on elderly, ill and other unfit Muslims to postpone pilgrimages to Mecca.

<http://www.reuters.com/article/healthNews/idUSTRE5751YZ20090806>