

Fears new deadly virus in Middle East could go global as millions prepare to visit the region for annual pilgrimage

- **Health officials in Saudi Arabia prepare for Hajj pilgrimage this autumn**
- **Middle East Respiratory Syndrome currently causing concern in area**
- **Deadly new virus is believed to be even more dangerous than SARS**
- **Millions from across globe are preparing to visit region for pilgrimage**

By James Rush



Millions of pilgrims are expected to descend upon Mecca, in Saudi Arabia, for this year's Hajj pilgrimage although health officials are concerned of a deadly new virus spreading

Fears over a global outbreak of a deadly new virus which has emerged in the Middle East are growing as millions of religious pilgrims prepare to visit the region.

Health officials in Saudi Arabia are preparing for the annual Hajj pilgrimage this autumn, which sees millions of Muslims visit the country each year.

But concerns in the area have been increasing over the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome, which is thought to be more dangerous than SARS, after more than 60 cases were reported in the last year by the World Health Organisation.

Officials in Saudi Arabia, where many of the MERS victims have been, are now doing all they can to track down the virus and prevent it from spreading during the pilgrimage, according to [Foreign Policy](#). There have been 77 laboratory-confirmed infections as of June 26. A total of 62 of these cases have been in Saudi Arabia, where 34 of the victims have died.

Last year approximately 6 million pilgrims travelled through the country as part of the event, which saw millions circle the Kaaba, in Mecca, alone.

The disease, which can spread easily between people, has been compared to SARS, which killed 800 people during an outbreak in 2003. Some experts have noted resemblances between the two as both spread easily between hospitals.

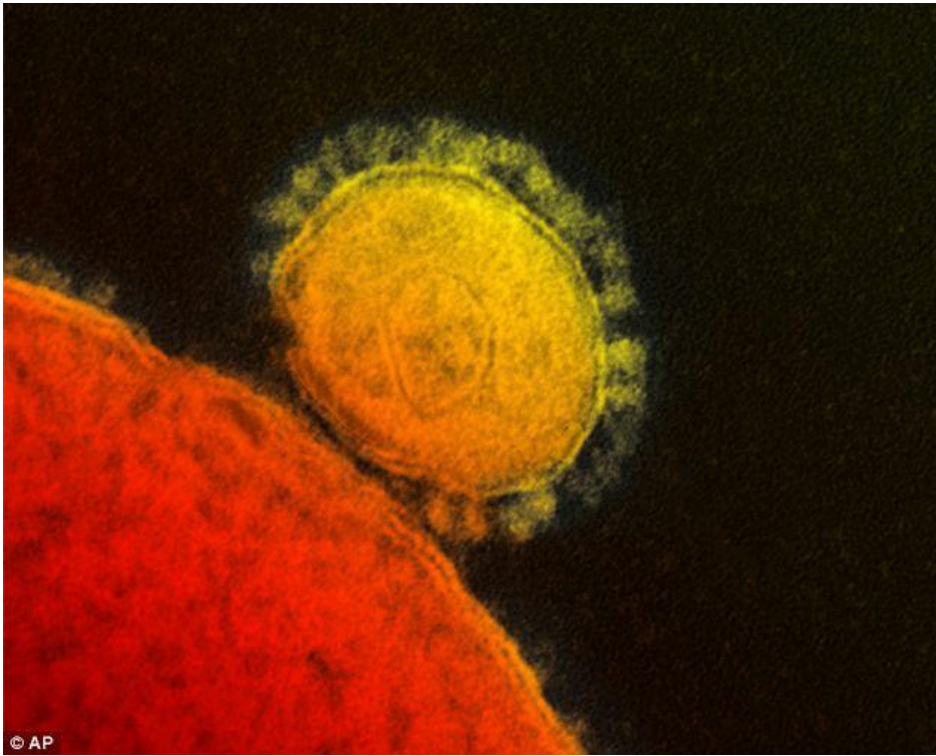
Symptoms are also similar with a fever and cough that develops into pneumonia.

But, doctors note that the fatality rate is higher. Eight per cent of SARS patients died, while 65 per cent of MERS cases are believed to have been fatal.

Doctors have not been able to pinpoint exactly how the illness is spread in every case, as some appeared to catch it when they had not been in contact with an infected person.

Cases have also been reported in Jordan, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Britain, France, Germany, Italy and Tunisia.

But, most cases have been in Saudi Arabia, which is also set to receive millions of Muslim pilgrims during Ramadan next month.

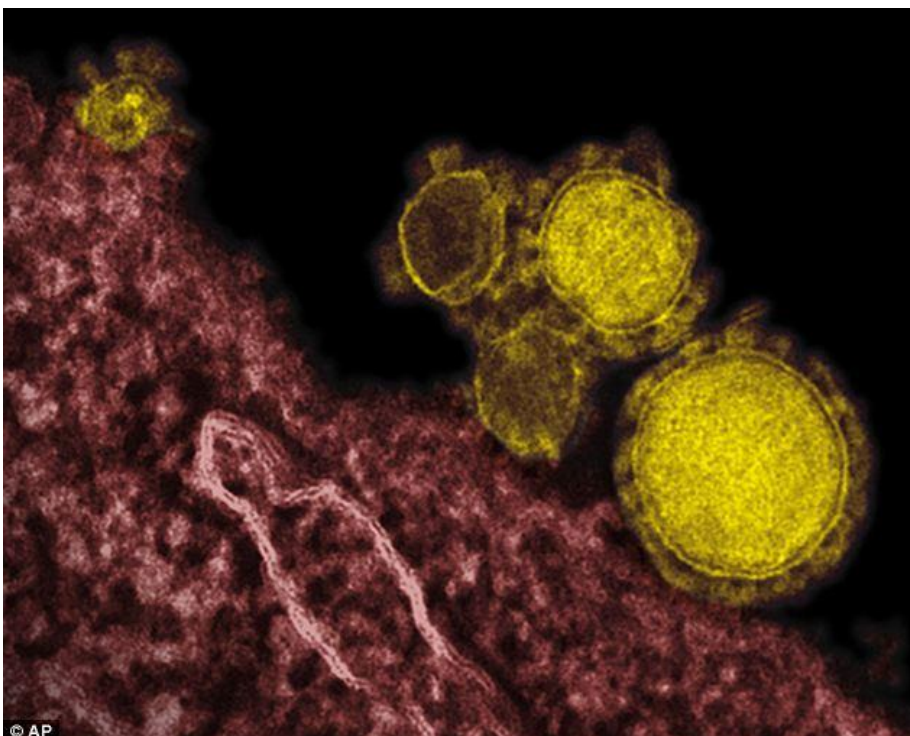


Doctors are worried after the new MERS disease (pictured) showed the potential to become as deadly as SARS

Experts say that despite the small number of cases, MERS must be watched as it has the potential to cause an outbreak.

WHO Director-General Dr Margaret Chan said: 'We understand too little about this virus when viewed against the magnitude of its potential threat.'

WHO is set to meet in Cairo next month to discuss MERS and its potential threat.



Most cases of the disease have been recorded in Saudi Arabia, which is also expecting millions of Muslim pilgrims to visit next month during Ramadan