

Spread of coronavirus disease-19 among devotees during religious congregations

Syed Lal Badshah, Asad Ullah

Department of Chemistry
and Biochemistry, Islamia
College University,
Peshawar, Pakistan

**Address for
correspondence:**

Dr. Syed Lal Badshah,
Department of Chemistry
and Biochemistry, Islamia
College University
Peshawar, Old Jamrud
Road, Peshawar 25120,
Pakistan.
E-mail: shahbiochemist@
gmail.com

Submission: 18-04-2020

Accepted: 21-04-2020

Published: 18-06-2020

The novel coronavirus disease-19 (COVID-19) pandemic is spreading across the globe at an alarming rate, with approximately 2.5 million people having tested positive, and more than 150,000 deaths recorded from this infection as on April 18, 2020. On one hand, hospitals in the affected areas have a shortage of ventilators for severely ill COVID-19 patients, whereas on the other hand, due to the high death toll, the morgues and cemeteries are struggling to bury the dead. When the initial cases were recorded outside China, different countries and organizations immediately canceled their events and gatherings. For example, the American Physical Society canceled its annual meeting in Colorado, the American Society of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology annual meeting in San Diego in April 2020, and several other scientific organizations' annual meetings were canceled due to fear of spreading COVID-19 infection. It is common all over the world that practicing religious people did not follow the precautionary measures of social distancing in the COVID-19 pandemic. They are attending their churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples regularly in these difficult times. During the early spring season in Asia, there are several annual religious congregations that occur in different countries. The Tablighi Ijtima (Muslim missionary congregation) was also scheduled on different days from February to March 2020 in Malaysia, India, and Pakistan. In all three countries, these religious congregations were held, and several hundred foreigners from different countries traveled to and participated in each separate congregation.

One annual conference (Ijtima) was held at Raiwind town in Lahore, Pakistan from

March 10 to 12, 2020. It was attended by 100,000–250,000 people from all over Pakistan and around the world. At this conference, attendees pray and eat together for 3 continuous days. After the end of the conference, most of these missionaries spread out to do their work and travel to different places for 40 days. They are usually assigned a specific city where they perform their missionary work in groups of three to four from dawn to dusk and then gather in the mosque for a comprehensive lecture. During a single day, they try to meet as many people as possible by knocking on house doors and shops and interact with whoever they meet on their way, inviting them to their mosques for a sermon. The foreign attendees who transmitted the COVID-19 infection included two persons from the Palestinian territory. They infected other people in the Palestine. In the Palestinian territory, which is already under blockade from Israeli occupation, medical conditions are dire, and the further burden of COVID-19 will devastate them. There are five Kyrgyzstan nationals who were preaching their faith in two mosques in the Islamabad area and five Nigerian female attendees who were also quarantined in the Rawalpindi area. These were some of the confirmed attendees of the religious

This is an open access journal, and articles are distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 License, which allows others to remix, tweak, and build upon the work non-commercially, as long as appropriate credit is given and the new creations are licensed under the identical terms.

How to cite this article: Badshah SL, Ullah A. Spread of coronavirus disease-19 among devotees during religious congregations. *Ann Thorac Med* 2020;15:105-6.

Access this article online

Quick Response Code:



Website:

www.thoracicmedicine.org

DOI:

10.4103/atm.ATM_162_20

conference in Lahore and were infected there.^[1] Inside Pakistan, around 38 Ijtema attendees who went to Sindh province for their missionary work got sick, and when tested for COVID-19, tested positive. These patients were quarantined in the local mosques so that further spread was avoided. Several missionaries were harassed in different areas of Sindh province, where the local people reported them to the police for their activities. The government authorities then requested that these missionaries quarantine themselves in those mosques where they were staying so that further spread could be avoided. Similarly, around 2500 people, including 1500 foreigners who were staying at their main center in Raiwind, were also quarantined along with the entirety of Raiwind town; all its shops were closed, and roads and bus stops were sprayed with disinfectant. There are a total of 152 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and two deaths among those who attended this religious gathering in Lahore, Pakistan.^[2] Around 7000 people from Punjab province who attended this religious conference were traced and quarantined. Only 1500 foreigners were quarantined in Punjab, whereas the rest had already left Pakistan and were traveling to different parts of the world. In the Sindh province of Pakistan, the Muslim missionaries who had been infected with COVID-19 at the Lahore congregations were persecuted and harassed in the towns by people where they were doing their missionary work.

In India, the congregation was held at the Alami Markaz Banglewali mosque in the Nizamuddin area of New Delhi, India, from February 25 to 28, 2020. This congregation was also attended by Muslim devotees from Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Nepal, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Kyrgyzstan, Afghanistan, the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Canada, and European countries. When the COVID-19 cases emerged in India, Islamophobia, already at a peak, caused most Indians to blame the infection on these devotees, and consequently, the Muslim population were persecuted in different ways.^[3] It has been estimated that among the Tablighi Ijtema attendees, around 600 foreigners have symptoms of COVID-19 and 24 are confirmed cases. So far, there are around 1700 foreigners who have been quarantined in different

locations in New Delhi, whereas 25,500 devotees who have traveled to other parts of India have been traced and quarantined at different locations. Currently, India has 4421 confirmed cases and 114 deaths from COVID-19, and the whole country has been on lockdown for 21 days with the possibility of extension.^[3]

The other Tablighi Ijtema was held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia from February 27, to March 2020, and around 16,000 people participated, which also included 1500 foreign missionaries. Approximately 600 people who took part in this congregation, where attendees pray, eat, and sleep in the packed halls of the mosque, tested positive for COVID-19. It was attended by many people from China, which is how Severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) spread through Malaysia and from here to other Southeast Asian countries. Currently, Malaysia has 3793 confirmed cases of COVID-19, and 64 people have died from this contagious disease. Unfortunately, all of these three religious congregations have fueled the spread of viral infection across Asian countries, and as a result, Islamophobia has increased due to the pressurized social conditions. However, there is hope that quarantine and social distancing will lower the number of cases of this viral infection and that those affected by this disease will recover.^[4,5]

Acknowledgment

We appreciate Editage (www.editage.com) for English language editing.

References

1. Chaudry S. Coronavirus: Pakistan quarantines Tablighi Jamaat missionaries. *Middle East Eye* 2020.
2. France-Presse A. Amid COVID-19 fears, Pakistan searches for pilgrims from mass gathering. *Gulf News* 2020.
3. Dey S. Over 25,500 Jamaat members isolated. *The Times of India*; 2020.
4. Wilder-Smith A, Freedman DO. Isolation, quarantine, social distancing and community containment: Pivotal role for old-style public health measures in the novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV) outbreak. *J Travel Med* 2020;27:taaa020.
5. Lal-Badshah S, Ullah A, Hilal-Badshah S, Ahmad I. Spread of novel coronavirus by returning pilgrims from Iran to Pakistan. *J Travel Med* 2020;27:taaa044.