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Guidelines

Mass Gathering for Moharram Majlis and Procession During COVID-19

Objective

To provide guidelines to the health authorities, religious leaders, faith-based organizations, faith communities and national organizers of mass gatherings on education, preparedness, and response to reduce the risks of COVID-19 transmission associated with mass gathering events.

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. Religious mass gatherings are planned, but amid prevalence of Delta Variant of COVID-19, relevant authorities should ensure to implement prevention and control measures to reduce the risk of transmission or the potential strain on health services.

Role of Religious Leaders in COVID19 Education

If gatherings are permitted, religious leaders and communities should take the following steps to reduce the threat of COVID-19 transmission.

- Ensure mandatory vaccination (Administration of at least one dose is mandatory) of Zakirs for conducting Majalis.
- Ensure that accurate information is shared with communities regarding preventive measure for COVID19 and address the misinformation.
- Ensuring that a human-rights-based approach to advocacy, messaging, and service delivery is systematically upheld.
- Address the issues of stigma, violence, and the incitement of hate.
- Promoting interfaith collaboration and peaceful coexistence during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Strengthening mental and spiritual health, well-being, and resilience through social and other communications media.

Preparations-Administrative and Logistics



Local and national health authorities are the primary source of information and advice about COVID-19 in communities. Some of the aspects meriting necessary actions at Federal and Federating Units level, include following: -

- Mapping of all Imam Bargahs with their capacities by district and provincial administration in line with COVID protocols for smooth management
- Appropriate media campaign for awareness of masses for 'Safe Ashura'.
- Traditional security arrangements to guard against terrorist activities leading to unrest.
- Strict enforcement of SOPs by civil administration.

EVALUATION OF THE RISK FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH MASS GATHERING

- Reduce / minimize the participation strength (disallowing children, elderly and other vulnerable groups).
- Focus on licensed / traditional processions and Majalis only.
- Incorporation of state TV/ media houses for live broadcasting of renowned Zakireen to incentivize maximum people to stay home.
- Establishment of special vaccination camps with effect from 1st Muharram for on spot vaccination of individuals attending Majalis / processions.
- Making provisions for detecting and monitoring event-related cases of COVID-19, reducing the spread of the virus, managing ill persons, disseminating public health messages specific to COVID-19 in culturally appropriate ways and in languages used by community.
- Establishing a clear line of command and control and enabling efficient situation analysis and decision-making specially for the 9th and 10th Moharram processions.
- Developing a risk communication strategy and a community engagement plan for the event aimed at keeping the public informed about the health situation, key developments, and any advice and recommended actions they should take (e.g. social media monitoring).

ASSESSMENT OF CAPACITIES AND RESOURCES

- Making provisions for human resources, procurement of personal protective equipment and other medical consumables, cleaning schedules, etc., in close coordination with national and local health authorities, and other relevant authorities.
- Modify the characteristics of the event such as venue, attendees, facilities, equipment as per requirement.
- 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 appropriately (ensure nose and mouth are covered) and practice hand hygiene.
- Train them for facilitating the processions in rows maintaining a distance of 2 meters between individuals.
- Train them for setting up water containers and stalls of pre-packaged boxes/servings of religious foods, rather than shared portions from communal containers.
- Ensure that no utensils e.g. glass, spoons or plates are shared among the attendants of the majlis/ procession. Use disposable items.
- Train them to update and distribute timely and accurate emergency communication information with the organizers 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.

Protocol

GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

- Emphasis on adherence to COVID SOPs during Majalis and processions (appropriate wearing of masks to ensure nose and mouth are covered and availability / use of sanitizers).
- 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 and instructions for appropriate use to ensure nose and mouth are covered.
- Maintain a safe distance of 2 meters (6 feet) from each other indoors as well as outdoors.
- Ensuring availability of handwashing facilities with soap and water and/or hand rub dispensers with alcohol-based (70%) hand sanitizer.
- Do not allow the individuals with cough and flu to enter the majlis/ procession.
- Advising people with COVID-19 symptoms, contacts of COVID-19 cases during their period of quarantine, or those coming from countries/areas with ongoing community transmission of COVID-19 to not attend the majlis/ procession.
- Advising people with higher risk of developing severe illness from COVID-19 (e.g., aged ≥ 60 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 majlis/ procession.
- Adjust the official capacity of the venue to accommodate the individuals with safe distance practices.
- Visual reminders on actions and steps to be followed by people developing symptoms of COVID19.
- Visual reminders on recommended/required use of face masks.



- Individuals who develop symptoms upon returning to their home should be advised to contact public health authorities about their potential exposure
- Liaison between event organizers and health authorities is required to ensure that systems are in place to detect cases arising in the local population as a consequence of the event.

SPECIFIC CONSIDERATIONS FOR MAJLIS

- Venue for conduct of Majalis should be open and spacious with proper ventilation arrangements.
- Social distancing of maintaining 6 feet is mandatory; Imam Bargahs administration to ensure markings for facilitation; sketch is attached at Annexure A.
- Thermal screening of all individuals at entrance.
- Wearing of masks be made mandatory, ensuring that nose and mouth are covered; availability of masks and sanitizers / hand washing arrangements at entrance be ensured by organizing committees.
- Health desks be established to help segregate symptomatic individuals; those with signs of cough, flu /fever must not be permitted to enter.
- Capacity of the venues be ascertained according to social distancing protocols and number of participants exceeding the established capacity may not be permitted.
- Strictly regulating the entry and exit (avoiding overcrowding at the time of arrival and dispersal) from venue.
- Majalis where SOPs cannot be effectively implemented such as homes and private gatherings should be discouraged.
- Elderly above 60, children, those with co-morbidities and exposed contacts of infected individuals must be encouraged to attend Majalis at home through live streaming / SMN.
- Lengthy Majalis be avoided; timings must be strictly adhered to.
- Avoid touching, kissing / hugging the devotional objects.
- Tabarruk etc be only distributed in parcels (ensure availability of disposable utensils).
- Cleaning/ washing of floor with chlorine/bleach before and after the Majalis.
- Use of personal prayer mats / cloths and rosaries during the Majalis.
- Display of COVID SOPs and precautions at prominent places.
- Close coordination between event organizers, administration and LEAs.

SPECIFIC CONSIDERATIONS FOR PROCESSIONS (JULOOS)

- Licensed / traditional procession be allowed only, while adhering to proper COVID protocols; efforts must be made to reduce number of processions.
- Focus on essential rituals only and avoidance of prolonged activities / extended procession duration.
- Use of masks is mandatory for Azadars; participation without mask must not be permitted.
- Ensure maintenance of social distance as much possible during procession through innovative means. No handshake and embracing.



- Availability / use of hand sanitizers at multiple spots during procession.
- Avoid touching, kissing / hugging the devotional objects with emphasis on distant Ziarat (Alam, Tazia and Shabeeh etc).
- Elderly above 60, children, those with co-morbid conditions and relatives/contacts of infected individuals should be sensitized to stay at home.
- Number of participants / Azadars be kept reasonable and procession timings should be curtailed / reduced.
- SOPs compliance by employing volunteer scouts.
- Arrangements for Nazro niaz in spacious and ventilated place.
- Only disposable utensils and pre-packaged boxes for distribution of food should be allowed.
- Avoiding overcrowding at food distribution points / locations.
- 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 as with those of the participant's home city or country, and facilitate sharing of information and further course of action.

Role of Community

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:

MAINTAIN SAFE DISTANCE

- Ensure wearing a face mask to cover both nose and mouth, before leaving house or in the public space.
- Maintain the safe distance of 2 meters (6 feet) from each other indoors/ outdoors
- 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.

PREVENT TOUCHING AMONG PEOPLE ATTENDING FAITH SERVICES

- Replace hugs and handshakes with a bow or peace sign or using a greeting in sign language while maintaining physical distance.
- Greet people at the entry to worship spaces with friendly words and smiles, rather than handshakes or other forms of physical contact.
- Any form of culturally and religiously sanctioned alternative may be adopted, that avoids physical contact.

PREVENT TOUCHING OR KISSING OF DEVOTIONAL OBJECTS THAT ARE ACCUSTOMED TO COMMUNAL HANDLING

- Witness the sacred icons from a distance instead of touching them.



- Receive a blessing from at least 1 m away and avoid the distribution of edibles through hands or drinking from a common cup.
- Use disposable utensils and individual pre-packaged boxes/servings of religious or ceremonial foods, rather than shared portions from communal containers.
- Encourage worshippers to perform their ritual ablutions at home before attending the prayers, majlis or procession.

ENCOURAGE HEALTHY HYGIENE AMONG ATTENDEES

- Help attendees maintain healthy hygiene practices by providing handwashing facilities for members before and after the service; or by placing alcohol-based hand-rub (at least 70% alcohol) at the entrance and in the worship space.
- Ask attendees to bring their own personal prayer rugs to place over carpets for daily prayers.
- When attendees 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.
- Encourage individuals to avoid attending the majlis/ procession if they have any symptoms of COVID-19 or if they have travelled recently to an area with ongoing community spread.

FREQUENTLY CLEAN WORSHIP SPACES, SITES, AND BUILDINGS

- Establish routine cleaning with disinfectant of worship spaces, majlis halls, and other buildings where people gather, between events.
- Disinfect the frequently touched objects such as doorknobs, light switches, and stair railings.
- 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 Syeda Shehirbano Akhtar and HSA/ HPSIU/ NIH team to compile these guidelines.



References:

1. World Health Organization. Practical considerations and recommendations for religious leaders and faith-based communities in the context of COVID-19, Interim guidance, April 2020
2. 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://nhsrc.gov.pk/>

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

<http://www.hsa.edu.pk/>

<https://twitter.com/nhsrcofficial>

<https://www.nih.org.pk/>

<https://www.youtube.com/NHSRC-PK>



Annex-A

Sketch of Social Distance Markings in a Mosque/ Imam Bargah

