



Date: 30 April 2021  
Document Code: 70-01  
Version: 01

## Guidelines

# Mass Gathering for Youm-e-Ali Procession During COVID-19 Pandemic

### 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 gatherings and processions on Youm-e-Ali.

### Rationale

Public gatherings amplify transmission of Covid-19 and can potentially disrupt the country's response capacity. Youm-e-Ali congregations and processions should be organized in accordance with Standard Operating Procedures to minimize chances of spread.

### Role of Religious Leaders in COVID-19 Education

Religious leaders and communities should ensure that accurate information is shared with communities regarding preventive measure for COVID-19 and address the misinformation.

### 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.

### EVALUATION OF THE RISK FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH MASS GATHERING

- Establishing direct links and channels of communication between event organizers, health authorities, and other relevant authorities.
- Establishing collaboration and coordination mechanisms among all stakeholders, partners, and constituencies involved in the event.
- 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.



## 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/ procession.

## TRAINING OF SCOUTS/ VOLUNTEERS

All the scouts/ volunteers must wear face mask (fabric or surgical mask) appropriately to cover nose and mouth and practice frequent hand hygiene.

Train the scouts/ volunteers for:

- Checking temperature using thermal guns and verbal screening to identify the symptoms of COVID-19
- Facilitating the processions in rows maintaining a distance of at least 1 meter between individuals.
- Providing masks and hand sanitizers where appropriate
- Setting up water containers and stalls of pre-packaged boxes/servings of religious foods; no utensils or spoons allowed
- 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

- 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 at least 1 meter (3 feet) from each other indoors as well as outdoors.
- Ensure 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 COVID-19 symptoms (sore throat, cough, fever) and contacts of known COVID-19 cases during their period of quarantine, to attend the procession/ majlis.
- Advising people with higher risk of developing severe illness from COVID-19 (e.g., aged  $\geq 65$  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 procession/ majlis.

- Visual reminders on SOPS, actions and steps to be followed during majlis/procession.
- Individuals who develop symptoms after the event should, in addition to seeking medical advice, 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 because of the event.

### **SPECIFIC CONSIDERATIONS FOR MAJLIS**

- Majlis may be relayed online. If a gathering is planned, it should be held outdoors.
- Gatherings in enclosed spaces are prohibited.
- Organizers to provide face masks to those participants who arrive without facemask. Hand sanitizers should also be made available.
- Participants to wear masks appropriately, covering both nose and mouth; observe physical distancing, respiratory/cough etiquette, and hand hygiene.
- The religious scholar (Aalim/ Zakir) must only be allowed to address the gatherings in-person after having a negative COVID19 PCR or Rapid Antigen Test.
- Pulpit (Mimbar) must be at least 6 feet away from the audience.
- Mark spaces with at least 3 feet (1 meter) distance in either direction for seating of participants.
- Ensure regular and thorough cleaning and disinfection (with bleach) of the venue by designated staff.
- Keep the duration of the event to a minimum to limit contact among participants.

### **SPECIFIC CONSIDERATIONS FOR PROCESSIONS (JULOOS)**

Large gatherings and processions are “super-spreader” events and must be avoided at all costs.

- Regulate the number and flow of people entering, attending, and departing from procession to ensure safe distancing (at least 1 meter) at all times.
- Religious leaders and communities of faith should consider multiple services with a few attendees, rather than hosting large gatherings.
- The procession must not be allowed to stop at narrow spaces. The stop points must be predetermined and ensured to be wide open spaces with adequate ventilation.
- If attendees, organizing staff and/or scouts develop symptoms during or after the event, organizers should liaise with national and local health authorities and facilitate sharing of information.

### **SPECIFIC CONSIDERATIONS FOR PRAYERS**

- Thermal screening for all worshippers and provision of hand sanitizer at gate of mosque/ imam bargah.



- The waiting time between the call to prayer and the actual prayer is limited to 10 minutes to avoid overcrowding.
- Windows and doors of the mosque/ imam bargah should be kept open for good ventilation during the prayer.
- Worshippers should bring their own prayer mat (janamaz) and not leave them behind after the prayer.
- Worshipers must maintain at least 1 meter distance between each other, and every other row should be left empty.

### AVOID PHYSICAL CONTACT

- Replace hugs and handshakes with a bow or peace sign or using a greeting in sign language while maintaining physical distance.
- Any form of culturally and religiously sanctioned alternative that avoids physical contact should be adopted.

### PREVENT TOUCHING OR KISSING OF DEVOTIONAL OBJECTS

- Witness sacred icons from a distance instead of touching them.
- Receive blessing from at least 1 m away; avoid distribution of unwrapped edibles and drinking from a common cup.
- Individual pre-packaged boxes/servings of religious or ceremonial foods may be distributed instead of servings from communal containers.
- Worshippers to perform their ritual ablutions at home before attending the prayers, majlis or procession.
- Place alcohol-based hand-rub (at least 70% alcohol) at the entrance and in the worship space.

*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://nhsrco.gov.pk/>

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

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

<https://twitter.com/nhsrcoofficial>

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

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