

Lines of Action Against COVID-19 During the Largest Religious Gathering in Africa: The Grand Magal of Touba/Senegal

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The Grand Magal of Touba in Senegal is an international religious event that commemorates the departure into exile in Gabon of Sheikh Ahmadou Bamba, founder of Mouridism [1]. It brings together several thousand people each year and in 2019, four and a half million people from various backgrounds made the trip for the event [2]. The town of Touba alone has nearly two million inhabitants [3].

As part of its celebration on October 6, 2020 and to ensure the smooth running of the event in a context marked by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Epidemiological Alert and Prevention Unit was created.

In close collaboration with the organizing committee of the Grand Magal of Touba and the medical region, the main mission was to develop and implement strategies that could contribute to the response to epidemics in general and to the Covid19 in particular. The strategies and activities carried out were on six to seven axes.

- Reducing the risk of COVID-19 contamination in holy places

This concerned the measures and gestures of hygiene or barrier gestures to be respected. A large-scale distribution of masks, hydroalcoholic gels, hand washing devices, disinfection gantries and the marking out of the entrance and the interior of the holy places to respect physical distance.

- The identification and orientation of persons suspected of COVID-19 and the continuity of other health services.

This was an essential part of the response, which required the implementation of monitoring and alert systems with 126 advanced medical stations and health service delivery points to detect positive cases of COVID-19, but also to manage patients suffering from other chronic pathologies to ensure continuity of care at the same time. A strengthening of human resources and logistics has improved the quality and quantity of services offered.

- Breaking down barriers of resistance to good behavior

At this stage of the pandemic, contamination can easily be prevented through behaviors such as wearing masks, hand washing, and physical distancing. Mobilization of the entire community has brought religious leaders to the forefront to highlight the pedagogy by example and generate widespread community engagement. This contributed to annihilating the risks of contamination.

- Assistance to the populations of the outlying neighborhoods

These populations are mostly destitute and in need of assistance. A free distribution of masks and gels in addition to the installation of medical posts at this level has helped to improve behaviors favorable to the good health of the populations.

- The protection of religious leaders, a focal point for pilgrims

Appropriation of barrier measures and gestures has made it possible to better protect religious leaders. As their homes were the point of affluence for the faithful to pray, it was strongly recommended to surround the marabouts with devices such as Plexiglas hygiaphones and devices for washing and disinfection.

- Generalized prayer sessions to stem Covid-19 and other plagues

In the cultural and religious context of the celebration of this great event, the planning of Koran reading sessions and other prayers to curb the scourge was encouraged.

This action plan reduced the risk of spreading COVID-19 in Senegal by relying on prevention based on the wearing of masks, pedagogy by example with mouride figureheads put in the front line and a good warning and epidemiological surveillance system. At the end of the Grand Magal, only two new cases of COVID-19 were registered in the locality of Touba. Fourteen days before the event and fourteen days after, the indicators at the national level have for the most part declined. Fourteen days before the Magal, out of 16592 tests performed, 408 were positive, including 232 community cases, 205 serious cases and 10 deaths. Considering that fourteen days after the Magal, the incubation period would have elapsed, the indicators show that out of 13368 tests performed, 302 were positive, including 163 community cases, 76 serious cases and 7 deaths. This shows that the Grand Magal of Touba, even though it was celebrated with at least four million people gathered, did not lead to the spread of COVID-19.

Conclusion

In substance, the Touba Grand Magal took place in satisfactory health and safety conditions, despite the COVID-19 context. The implementation of the action plan, with its strategic axes, was a determining factor in controlling the national epidemiological situation. The Organizing Committee and the Alert and Prevention Unit urge the continuation of individual and collective protection and prevention efforts for better health in Senegal and throughout the world.

Aknowledgement

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