

## **Saudi Arabia suspends umrah due to COVID-19 concerns**

**AstroAwani**

**27 February 2020**

MUSLIMS planning to perform the umrah starting today can shelve their plans following the shock announcement by Saudi Arabia that entry into the Kingdom for that purpose has been temporarily suspended.

It has also suspended the entry of tourist visa holders coming from countries where cases of COVID-19 is on the rise.

The use of national identity (ID) cards in place of passports amongst Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members has also been suspended – to enable the tracking of points of origin of travellers into Saudi Arabia.

Tourist visa requirements that were relaxed recently to encourage greater tourism arrivals into the Kingdom, were also suspended.

There is great concern that COVID-19 is spreading westwards, affecting Middle Eastern nations, from China where the epidemic appears to have peaked.

Iran has been worst hit with 95 cases and 15 deaths recorded so far.

Elsewhere in the middle east and north Africa, new cases of COVID-19 have appeared, some of which were caused by transmission, following travel to and from Iran.

A number of Iran's neighbours have closed their borders and banned flights from the country.

Kuwait's coronavirus toll has risen to 25 by Wednesday, which included a Saudi citizen who was declared infected having visited Iran.

He is now undergoing treatment in Kuwait and will not return to Saudi until he recovers.

Similar patterns of infection resulting from travel to Iran has given rise to COVID-19 cases in Afghanistan, Iraq and Oman.

Elsewhere in Bahrain, three new cases were confirmed, bringing the total number of infections to 26.

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