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Letter to the Editor

Key factors in the contingency plan for COVID-19 during the Magal celebration in 2020

The 'Grand Magal' of Touba (GMT) is a religious event that celebrates the departure into exile in Gabon on September 21, 1895, of Sheikh Ahmadou Bamba. Every year, on the occasion of the 'Grand Magal', the holy city of Touba welcomes hundreds of thousands of Mouride faithful who come to commemorate this event. In 2019, Lô et al. report that 4.5 million people converged on Touba for the needs of the 'Magal'.¹ Researchers from the Alioune DIOP University of Bambey (Senegal)² have reported that the socio-economic dynamics of this influx were very lively.

The celebration of the 2020 edition of the GMT coincided with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic worldwide and the pilgrims who converged on the religious city are estimated at more than four million.

This letter to the editor presents the determinants on which the Epidemiological Alert and Prevention Unit relied to reduce the risks of transmission of COVID-19, before, during, and after the Touba 'Grand Magal'.

These determinants are essentially articulated around a triptych consisting of a dynamic and participatory prevention environment, an epidemiological surveillance and active monitoring system, and a generalized and contextualized community commitment.

Dynamic and participatory prevention

It is a conception of prevention that fits with the context or specificity of the holy city of Touba and with the nature or type of Mouride faithful in terms of behavior. In this form of prevention, a positive attitude in a holistic approach is advocated that takes into account all the internal and external dimensions of the brotherhood, and therefore, a potentially mobilizing method.

Competition and rivalry in generosity, through donations in kind and cash offered to the brotherhood or to the marabouts, were the levers on which the preventive approach was based. The particularity of COVID-19 required raising awareness at the highest level of the Mouride hierarchy for a 'ndigël' or recommendation in favor of the availability of five million masks for pilgrims. By creating emulation, this act remained a regalian and priestly mission for every Mouride disciple. It also made it possible to cover quantitatively, beyond the forecasts, the needs in this field to limit the potential spread of viruses, especially at the level of gathering places such as mosques and mausoleums. In total, masks, antiseptic hand solutions, hand washing devices, and disinfection gantries installed at the entrance to the focal points, along with monitoring units that supervise the movement of people, have made it possible to control the transmission of COVID-19. In addition, radio and

television broadcasts and awareness caravans have been organized on all the main arteries of the Holy City.

This determinant of the socio-religious environment was essential to facilitate an epidemiological surveillance system.

Epidemiological surveillance and active monitoring system

The surveillance of a disease or health-related event requires careful monitoring based on a network of actors and well-coordinated sources of information. In other words, collecting, analyzing, interpreting, and disseminating information to those who need it for public health decision-making.³ Basically, data are produced by health care providers who record, on an ongoing basis, acts, diagnoses, treatments, etc.⁴

In this register, the epidemiological alert and prevention unit set up on the occasion of the GMT by the organizing committee, through its action plan,⁴ superimposes two major strategic axes on the state health system in the zone. These are the identification and referral of suspect COVID-positive individuals with a view to diagnosis by RT-PCR, on the one hand, and on the other hand, to contribute significantly to the continuity of care for COVID-positive individuals and those with other chronic or acute pathologies. The implementation of these two major strategies required the creation of a real health task force with the common value of belonging to the Mouride brotherhood. In accordance with the national response strategy, only those with proven COVID symptomatology were tested. Out of all 126 health care and testing sites spread throughout the religious city, only 34 suspected cases were registered for testing, with two positive cases. Moreover, after the event, the overall trend was downward at the regional level even after the fourteen incubation period with 408 cases before and 302 after the Magal.

These comforting trends, beyond preventive and epidemiological strategies, are also the result of a generalized and contextualized community commitment on the part of all the actors, from the simple faithful to the marabouts to the hierarchical religious organizations, commonly called 'dahira'.

Generalized and contextualized community engagement

Community engagement is the process by which delivery organizations and individuals build a long-term relationship with a collective vision for the benefit of communauté. It is primarily based on the involvement of communities mobilized toward better change through empowerment. Community engagement covers a

wide range of information, consultation, collaboration, and transfer or sharing of leadership with the community.

In this vein, the Alert and Prevention Unit has been aware of the importance of such ambitious lines of intervention as breaking down barriers of resistance to good behavior, protecting religious leaders around whom the faithful gather, and holding prayer sessions to stem the scourge.

It was, therefore, necessary to put into practice the pedagogy by example by diffusing through screens placed at the pilgrims' crossing points, images of General Khalife and other mouride leaders, showing their adherence to the barrier gestures and inspiring the faithful with regard to the good behavior of their guides. At the same time, social mobilizations and talks were organized to increase awareness of the donations of hygiene kits and masks in the community.

Touba's 'Grand Magal' edition of 2020 is finally celebrated under satisfactory health and safety conditions. Thanks to the leadership of the General Khalife of the mourides, the discipline of the faithful, and the respect of the prescriptions of the dignitaries of the brotherhood, the implementation of the strategies developed by the epidemiological alert and prevention unit made it possible to reach the objective of the 2020 edition, which was a 'Magal' without any revival of the coronavirus in Senegal.

Author statements

Ethical approval

Ethical approval was not required because this work was just the implementation and the results of an action plan developed during the largest religious gathering in West Africa.

Competing interests

There is no conflict of interest about this work.

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Authors' contribution

All authors contributed equally to this work.

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