

## **Managing Mass Gatherings: Panel at UN Advises Life-Course, Multi-Agency Approach**

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*Immunization, other preparations key to strategic health planning*

**Ambassador Al-Mouallimi offers Saudi Arabia know-how**

Mass gatherings such as sports events, festivals, music concerts, religious events, and political rallies present substantial economic and social opportunities for hosting nations. But managing large-scale planned events like the FIFA World Cup-- or reacting to spontaneous gatherings-- can stretch the capacities of routine health and public safety measures in hosting nations and place severe strains on infrastructure and the delivery of services. How to address these challenges was the subject of a panel luncheon hosted by the Business Council for the UN on December 10 at the Delegates Dining Room at UN Headquarters. "Mass Gatherings: do the challenges outweigh the opportunities for hosting nations?" convened guests from Permanent Missions, UN specialized agencies, business, ngos, and the broader UN system.



H.E. Abdallah Al-Moulallimi, Permanent Representative of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to the UN. [www.deutschphoto.com](http://www.deutschphoto.com)

Managing the influx of large numbers of people of all ages from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds requires precise strategic planning that anticipates all eventualities, such as disease or terrorism, and includes crowd and environmental management. The overarching message by the multi-sector panel representing perspectives of the UN, government, business, and civil society, was that the topic of mass gatherings, much neglected in traditional public health discourse, needs to be addressed in a whole-society, life-course and multi-agency approach for improved cooperation between all stakeholders. The discussion was moderated by Dr. Jane Barratt, Secretary General of the International Federation on Ageing, which collaborated with BCUN on the event, along with Shot@Life.

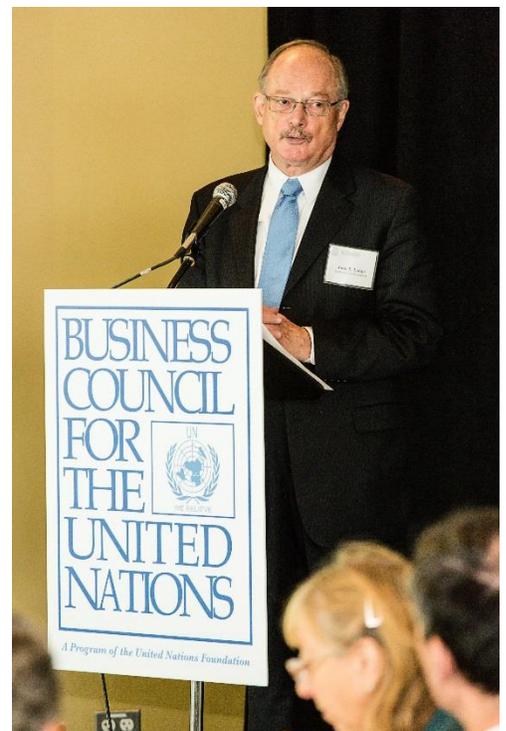
Addressing what is undoubtedly the "mother of all mass gatherings", **Abdallah Yahya A. Al-Mouallimi**, the Permanent Representative of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to the United Nations, captivated attendees with a detailed account of the meticulous planning, preparation and management that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia undertakes for the Hajj. The annual pilgrimage to Mecca—a duty for all Muslims who are physically and financially able, at least once in a lifetime-- involves different steps and stages and requires the performance of a series of formal rituals at various holy sites. Every year, during the five day Hajj period, between 3 and 3.5 million worshippers gather and, simultaneously, move along the various stations spanning across Mecca, Mina, Arafat and Muzdalifah.

According to Ambassador Al-Mouallimi, the challenge is that this process not only involves moving people, but also the services they require, such as health care and security. Accommodating the annual influx of pilgrims from over 180 countries requires precise strategic coordination of various sectors of government and a combination of the three elements of technology, management and a spiritual dimension of devotion and tolerance. “But the good news is that we have over 1400 years of experience with it,” quipped Al-Mouallimi while describing innovative ways and infrastructural changes to support the mass gathering. It is particularly noteworthy that all preparations, from constructing a fire-resistant temporary tent city for 3 million people in Mina, to monitoring and controlling movement with real-time geographical information systems and electronic gates, providing modern transportation and quality health services comprising more than 20,000 health workers, 25 mobile hospitals, 141 health centers and 175 state-of-the-art ambulances, are undertaken by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia at its own cost as a service to the pilgrims. The permanent representative emphasized that Saudi Arabia takes its responsibilities very seriously and in fact commences preparations for the next season by drawing up lessons learned less than one week after the Hajj ends. He also mentioned that one of the most important parts of the job of the Kingdom’s diplomatic representations abroad is working with local authorities on instructing, equipping and preparing pilgrims for the journey to Mecca.



Jane Barratt, Secretary General, International Federation on Ageing, with panel [www.deutschphoto.com](http://www.deutschphoto.com)

Mass gatherings, according to **Ambassador John Lange**, Senior Fellow for Global Health Diplomacy at the United Nations Foundation, fail to receive the attention they deserve and there needs to be a dialogue on the health threats associated with events of this nature. Speaking from an applied health perspective, Lange elaborated on polio and pandemic influenza, two conditions particularly relevant in the context of mass gatherings. While great progress has been made on the W.H.O. commitment to eradicate polio, a highly infectious disease which mainly affects young children and causes paralysis, it is still transmitted in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Nigeria, and recent outbreaks have been recorded in areas of Somalia and Syria. The risk of transmission is dangerously high due to the fact that, on average, one case of the disease leads to 150-200 further infections in individuals who may not display symptoms themselves, but spread the virus. In Lange’s assessment, the concern with mass gatherings comes into play when dealing with countries with poor sanitation and low levels of immunization. Similarly, the direct human-to-human transmission of pandemic influenza, which, depending on severity of the pandemic, can lead to pneumonia and death predominantly in the young and elderly, presents a major threat in the context of mass gatherings. On both cases, Ambassador Lange commended the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia for its handling of the polio and pandemic influenza threat through succinct health interventions, regulations, and guidelines which communicate essential information to pilgrims and require polio vaccinations prior to arrival,



Amb. John E. Lange (fmr), Senior Fellow for Global Diplomacy, UN Foundation [www.deutschphoto.com](http://www.deutschphoto.com)

provide them to anyone under 15 at the first point of entry into the country and, during the H1N1 pandemic, allowed only visitors between the ages of 12-65 to participate. For the international community as a whole, Lange highlighted that W.H.O. international health regulations play a central role in strengthening national core health capacity and stressed that the political momentum and resources generated in the lead-up to mass gatherings present an important opportunity that should be leveraged to build sustainable and long term health legacies.



Gregg Sylvester, Senior Director, Global Medical Vaccines Lead, Pfizer  
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From a private sector perspective, **Dr. Gregg Sylvester**, Senior Director, Global Medical Vaccines Lead at Pfizer, advocated that given the tremendous advances over the last century in the areas of immunization, water and sanitation, public health has a lot to celebrate. And while society has given great importance to ensuring child immunization, even more efforts need to go into thinking about a life-course approach to establish a system of adult vaccinations for an increasingly ageing population—one factor being that the body’s immune system begins to wane as we grow older. According to Sylvester, when it comes to mass gatherings, health-related practical issues which need to be considered carefully are good sanitation, food, and catering to prevent food-borne diseases, as well as trauma in the form of stampedes and other crowd disasters. He stated that Saudi Arabia truly is the leader in mass gatherings and added the factor of preparedness to the list of important elements mentioned previously by Ambassador Al-Mouallimi. This applies not only to good public health preparations, but also to health care and emergency medicine preparedness, all of which are not only the responsibility of the host country, but a shared obligation for the entire international community. National authorities of both hosting and participating nations need to address a number of key areas in close cooperation, coordination and evaluation, such as appropriate infection control measures, enhanced disease surveillance, good laboratory and clinical support, national vaccine guidelines as well as rapid testing for outbreaks and, if necessary, isolation.

The panel concluded with a number of insightful interventions and questions from the audience. Among them, **Laurie Phipps**, advisor at the U.S. Mission to the UN, highlighted the important work on mass gatherings by the Centers for Disease Control. **Stéphane Dujarric**, Director of News and Media for the UN Department of Public Information, engaged in discussion with the Permanent Representative about the level of work Saudi Arabia undertakes with the countries of origin on screening and preparing pilgrims for health and safety issues.



Laurie Phipps, advisor, US Mission to the UN  
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BCUN looks forward to continuing information exchange on mass gatherings preparedness and management; interested people can contact the BCUN office for more information. The panel luncheon was made possible by a grant from Pfizer.

By Anna Fritzsche. Anna is an M.A. graduate of SAIS in International Affairs and works at the United Nations Foundation in New York.



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*Allison MacEachron*

*Director, Business Council for the UN*

*A program of the United Nations Foundation*

*801 Second Avenue, New York, NY 10017, 9<sup>th</sup> fl*

*212 907-1386*

[AMacEachron@unfoundation.org](mailto:AMacEachron@unfoundation.org)

[www.bcun.org](http://www.bcun.org)