

Muslims Begin Haj Pilgrimage

Written by Robert ID722

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More than two million Muslim pilgrims arrived in the tented city of Mena Tuesday, the first day of a haj pilgrimage marked by grief over the Asian tsunami disaster and security fears.

This year's haj has a particular poignancy for thousands of pilgrims from Asia, where most of the world's one billion Muslims live, after December's devastating tsunami caused by an undersea earthquake off Indonesia.

Tragedy has struck the haj before. Saudi Arabia has cranked up its largest security operation ever for the ritual, a once in a lifetime duty for every able-bodied Muslim, fearing attacks or deadly stampedes like one last year that killed 250 people.

Indonesian officials have said they expect the country to reach its 205,000 quota for pilgrims despite the killer waves that killed more than 175,000 people.

Some prominent clerics in Saudi Arabia, which imposes a hard-line brand of Sunni Islam alien to most Muslims, have suggested the disaster was Indonesia's punishment for its Western-style mixed-sex beaches, bars and nightclubs.

But many pilgrims said the Koran did not support such a view.

"Although the Koran does talk about God using natural phenomenon to punish people who have gone astray, it is not for us to say or to know," said Sayeed Mohamed, a preacher from South Africa where Islam is growing fast.

"This disaster is very sad for us," said Nasser Mohamed, an Indonesian who lives in Saudi Arabia.

However, Hadi Abderrazak said young people in Indonesia needed to become more aware of

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Islam.

"Most youths in our society are going to schools where they learn nothing about religion. In cities like Jakarta all they care about is rap music and the affairs of the world," he said.

Other pilgrims were more concerned with key issues to Muslims, such as Israel's occupation of Jerusalem's holy sites.

"We saw the tsunami disaster on television, but it's far from us. We care about Palestine," said Nasser Abdullah from Yemen.

SECURITY

About 50,000 police and 7,000 special forces have been deployed around Mecca to prevent stampedes, protests or attacks.

The pro-U.S. Saudi monarchy, which is under attack from Osama bin Laden's al Qaeda network, fears militants might even strike during the pilgrimage.

Saudi Arabia's ability to host about two million pilgrims each year is central to the absolute monarchy's legitimacy.

It also fears protests by pilgrims from Iran, whose rocky relations with Washington have worsened under President Bush, and Libya, which Riyadh accuses of trying to assassinate Crown Prince Abdullah -- a charge Tripoli denies.

Deadly stampedes have marred the haj in recent years, killing some 250 in 2004 in a rite involving stoning pillars representing the devil, which this year falls Thursday.

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New measures at the site include signs warning of overcrowding, extra emergency exits and a unit to bulldoze makeshift roadside pilgrim camps, which the government blamed for the overcrowding behind last year's deadly crush.

Haj Minister Iyad Madani has said up to three million may take part in Wednesday's rites at Mount Arafat at the plain of Mena, outside Mecca.

Authorities have issued licenses to some 500,000 pilgrims from Saudi Arabia and to some 1.6 million pilgrims from abroad, but face the challenge of preventing others from sneaking in.

"Every year it's the same -- people living in (nearby) Jeddah will don their white pilgrim robes, jump in the car and drive straight up to Mena," one government official said.

Roads were clogged with some 15,000 buses ferrying pilgrims who choose not to go on foot. Many who lacked haj permits were able to dodge checkpoints by walking around them.

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