

GOVERNMENT OF INDIA  
MINISTRY OF MINORITY AFFAIRS

RAJYA SABHA  
STARRED QUESTION No. \*225  
ANSWERED ON 09.08.2023

**Problems faced by Haj Pilgrims**

\*225. SHRI MOHAMMED NADIMUL HAQUE:

Will the Minister of MINORITY AFFAIRS be pleased to state:

- (a) whether the Ministry is aware that Haj applicants faced troubles in embarking on pilgrimage with delays in Visa and last-minute flight rescheduling, particularly from Kolkata, if so, the reasons therefor;
- (b) whether Government has taken cognizance of the fact that there is a huge difference in amount to be remitted by pilgrims embarking from Srinagar and Kolkata as compared to other embarkation points of the country, if so, the reasons therefor; and
- (c) the reasons for delay in announcement of Haj in 2023 as compared to usual announcement in September every year?

ANSWER

MINISTER OF MINORITY AFFAIRS  
(SHRIMATI SMRITI ZUBIN IRANI)

(a) to (c): A statement is laid on the Table of the House.

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STATEMENT REFERRED TO IN REPLY TO PARTS (a) TO (c) OF RAJYA SABHA STARRED QUESTION NO. \*225 ANSWERED ON 09.8.2023 ASKED BY SHRI MOHAMMED NADIMUL HAQUE REGARDING “PROBLEMS FACED BY HAJ PILGRIMS”

(a) to (c): Government of India is continuously striving to make Haj experience better for Indian Haj pilgrims. In pursuit of that objective, a series of reforms had been introduced during Haj-2023, based on interaction with various stakeholders. The reforms introduced during this Haj includes, inter alia, abolition of discretionary VIP quota for the Government; increase in embarkation points from 10 in 2022 to 20 in 2023; allowing single females under Lady without Mehram category(LWM); direct involvement of Ministry of Health & Family Welfare (MoH&FW) and its agencies for Medical Screening and vaccination of pilgrims in India and setting up quality medical infrastructure including hospitals/dispensaries, in Saudi Arabia during Haj period; making Haj inclusive though special provisions in Haj policy for women, divyangjans and old age pilgrims; selection of Administrative Deputationists from CAPFs (thereby ensuring better professionalism and assistance to pilgrims in Saudi Arabia); deputing a senior officer of every State Govt. to assist the pilgrims from its state; provision for availability of foreign exchange through SBI at competitive rates as per the pilgrims’ actual needs instead of mandating the purchase of foreign exchange of a fixed amount as done in earlier years; doing away with non refundable application fees of Haj Committee of India (HCoI) pilgrims; cost cutting in Haj package of HCoI by removing non-essential components; and reduction in insurance cost charged per pilgrim by HCoI.

Further, the Haj Policy and Policy for HGOs for 2023 were framed by the Ministry after wide consultation with all stakeholders including State Haj Committees. The announcement for Haj-2023 was made only after the new Haj policy was finalised and various reforms were introduced so that maximum benefits to the Indian Haj pilgrims can be passed on from Haj-2023 itself. It was because of these reforms and preparation required for initiating these reforms that the announcement for Haj 2023 was made in the month of February-2023. All administrative preparations and processes related to Haj-2023 were however completed timely and there was no delay on any account.

At the time of filling of the Haj Application Forms (HAF), each applicant was asked for any 2 preferences of EPs, in order of priority, among the designated EPs across India based on their

convenience. Thereafter, based on the actual choice of the pilgrims for different EPs, bids were floated by Haj Air Travel Committee from the designated airlines of India and Saudi Arabia through an open tender process.

The air price at each Embarkation Point (EP) was accordingly discovered through a transparent bidding process. Based on the bids received, the lowest bidding airline was identified for each Embarkation Point (EP) in India and thereafter EPs were awarded. Thus, the airfare cost was discovered through an independent and transparent process depending on the market and commercial forces at work. Further, to ensure optimum price discovery at each EP, various restrictive provisions in bidding process for Air Charters were removed, leading to more participation of major Indian and Saudi Arabia based airlines and transparent price discovery. The airfare of Srinagar Embarkation Point was fixed as 1870 USD excluding airport tax, GST etc. while for Kolkata Embarkation Point it was fixed as 1645 USD excluding airport tax, GST etc. It is relevant to point out that bidding was carried out for each Embarkation Point separately and final price determined based on bids received. One EP cannot, therefore, be compared with another as there are multiple factors involved, such as geographical location, route plan, aircraft availability, commercial viability etc.

In the case of Kolkata Embarkation Point, the air charter operations were initially assigned to the lowest bidder, i.e. M/s GoAir airlines. However, after M/s GoAir airlines filed for insolvency, the Government of India proactively re-assigned Kolkata Embarkation Point air charter operations to another company, i.e. M/s Flyadeal airlines in order to minimize inconvenience to Pilgrims. Besides, some flights from Kolkata Embarkation Point were rescheduled due to some technical problems, which led to grounding of Flyadeal aircrafts. However, even in such cases, not only temporary arrangements were made within 24 hours to transport the pilgrims, but also all the affected passengers were facilitated and provided meals and accommodation.

The Haj Visa for pilgrims is approved by Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. This visa has to be obtained by filling details of each Haj Pilgrim on NUSUK Portal of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia by Haj Committee of India. The timings for approving the visa is decided by Saudi Arabia. As such, during Haj 2023, the first e-Visa for an Indian Haj Pilgrim was obtained on 30.04.2023.

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