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UZBEKISTAN: New haj pilgrimage, same old restrictions

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The Uzbek authorities have again this year imposed severe restrictions on how many pilgrims could take part in this year's haj pilgrimage, now underway in Saudi Arabia. Only 5,080 out of a potential quota of about 28,000 travelled to Mecca. About as many pilgrims travelled from Kyrgyzstan as from Uzbekistan, more than five times more populous. An official of one Sergeli District mahalla (neighbourhood), with between 3,000 and 7,000 residents, told Forum 18 News Service that "our mahalla will be able to send pilgrims only in 2012. Several people are on the waiting list but maybe only one will go." As before, an "unwritten instruction" banned would-be pilgrims under the age of 45, officials of a local mahalla committee in Tashkent told Forum 18. Pilgrims faced official screening, while secret police officers reportedly accompany the pilgrims. An Imam outside Tashkent, who did not wish to be named for fear of state reprisals, complained that "unofficial payments" more than doubled the cost of the haj. "The number of applicants would be much, much higher if the cost was not so high," he lamented to Forum 18.

In deciding whether or not applicants could travel on this year's Muslim haj pilgrimage to Mecca – now underway in Saudi Arabia – the Uzbek authorities continued to impose the same severe restrictions as in earlier years, Forum 18 News Service has found. The numbers were restricted to about one fifth of the potentially available quota, while would-be pilgrims under the age of 45 appear to continue to have been banned. Would-be pilgrims also needed to pass unwritten state controls, as well as to be able to afford high fees, including reported bribes. These restrictions again seriously limited the number of Muslims who could perform this obligation of their faith. Every able-bodied adult Muslim who can afford to do so is obliged to make a haj pilgrimage once in their lifetime.

With an estimated population of over 28,000,000, the government's Religious Affairs Committee stated on 15 October that 5,078 people would be allowed to go on the haj. The first flight left the capital Tashkent for Saudi Arabia on 19 October. The pilgrims are due to return to Uzbekistan later in November.

As in previous years, all pilgrims needed approval from local authorities, the National Security Service (NSS) secret police and other national authorities (see F18News 5 December 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1226).

More pilgrims from Russia or Afghanistan than Uzbekistan

Worldwide the numbers per country permitted are based on a country's population and allocated on that basis by Saudi Arabia, as guardian of the Islamic holy cities of Mecca and Medina. The quota is set at 1,000 pilgrims per million Muslim residents of a country, giving Uzbekistan a possible quota of about 28,000.

Afghanistan with a population a little over Uzbekistan's of almost 30,000,000 has sent around 30,000 pilgrims this year, and Russia (with around 20,000,000 Muslims) has sent about 22,500 pilgrims. Kazakhstan, with a population of around 15,000,000 (perhaps two-thirds of Muslim background) has sent 4,000 pilgrims this year.

The closest Central Asian country to Uzbekistan in terms of numbers of pilgrims sent is Kyrgyzstan, which sent 5,072 pilgrims this year out of a total population of around 5,500,000. The lowest number of pilgrims sent from Central Asia came from Turkmenistan, which as in previous years sent "about 180" pilgrims (including secret police and other officials) this year (see F18News 22 September 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1616).

Why can't Uzbekistan send its full quota?

Asked why Uzbekistan does not send its possible quota of between 20,000 and 30,000 pilgrims, Bahodyr Mamedkarimov, Legal Advisor to the Interior Minister, told Forum 18 on 4 November: "It is not we who decide this, but the Muslim Board."

A Saudi diplomat outside Uzbekistan and Saudi Arabia said that Uzbekistan could have asked Saudi Arabia to increase its haj quota. "I do not believe that Saudi Arabia has asked Uzbekistan to lower the quota [to current levels]," the diplomat, speaking on condition of anonymity as someone not authorised to speak to the media, told Forum 18 on 3 November. Forum 18 is aware that in the recent past Russia's and Turkey's quotas were increased at their request, while this year Kyrgyzstan successfully asked for an increase of 500.

Most other Saudi and Uzbek officials in Uzbekistan and Saudi Arabia would not comment on the issue to Forum 18. Telephones at Uzbekistan's Religious Affairs Committee in the capital Tashkent were not answered on 3 and 4 November.

No young pilgrims

Mahalla workers in one district of Tashkent told Forum 18 that there was "an unwritten instruction from district authorities" that all haj applicants must be over 45 years old. An age limit has been among the restrictions in previous years (see F18News 5 December 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1226).

Many are willing, few are chosen

State officials at a national and local level are highly reluctant to discuss how many pilgrims are allowed to travel on the haj and especially why numbers are so low.

Every single district in Uzbekistan's regions is allocated a quota for haj pilgrims, a human rights defender from Tashkent, who did not wished to be named for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 4 November. This follows the practice of previous years (see F18News 5 December 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1226).

An official of a mahalla committee in Tashkent's Mirzo Ulugbek District, who asked not to be named, complained to Forum 18 that their District has around 250,000 residents but can send only between 30 to 40 pilgrims each year. The official said that it is the Religious Affairs Committee which decides the numbers of haj pilgrims for each District.

Labar (she did not give her last name), an official of Mirzo Ulugbek District's Central mahalla committee, on 3 November refused to give the number of pilgrims from the District this year – or to discuss any other issue. She referred Forum 18 to the District Administration. The District Administration's phones went unanswered on the same day.

An Imam from Khorezm Region in western Uzbekistan noted that 200 people applied for the Haj in the Region. The Regional Administration "selected only 100 because that was the quota given for our Region from Tashkent," he lamented to Forum 18 in early October.

In Uzbekistan's central Samarkand Region, Khujakul Mukhamadiyev, the Administration's official in charge of religious issues, refused to give any information. On 3 November he took down Forum 18's name and the question why the number of pilgrims is so low. After repeating several times that he could not hear well, he put the phone down. However, Forum 18's end of the line was very clear. Subsequent calls went unanswered.

Imam Nurullokhon Ismoilov, Chief Imam of Samarkand Region, told Forum 18 on 3 November that 375 Muslims went on Haj pilgrimage this year. He said that the number of pilgrims was "about the same" as in 2010. Asked why Samarkand, which has more than 2,300,000 inhabitants, would send only 375 pilgrims, he claimed that the number of applicants is not much higher, but refused to say what the number is. "And then many are turned down because of health and other issues," he said, not wishing to clarify what the other issues were.

Imam Ismoilov also argued that the country's quota of roughly 5,000 is a mutually agreed figure between Saudi Arabia and Uzbekistan.

Objecting to this was another Sunni Imam from Samarkand, who asked not to be named, saying that the number of applicants from the Region this year was as high as 4,000. He said that the Religious Affairs Committee does not want high numbers of pilgrims. He declined to discuss with Forum 18 the reasons for this, fearing that it could lead to problems for him from the authorities.

Fakhriddin Khuseinov, Imam of Panjab Shia Mosque in Samarkand, told Forum 18 on 4 November that eight Shia Muslims were able to go on haj this year. Asked why so few pilgrims were chosen from Samarkand's Shia community, which estimates that it has about 200,000 members, he said that he does "not want" to complain. "Our pilgrims are given freedom" by Uzbek officials during the haj "to pray separately from the Sunnis, who have a different tradition," he pointed out.

The population of Andijan Region in eastern Uzbekistan is estimated to be around 1,899,000, thus making it the most densely populated Region of the country. An official of one mahalla committee in Andijan city said that of the 76 mahallas in the city, not every one can send a Muslim resident on the haj every year because of the waiting lists. "We could only send one haj pilgrim from our mahalla this year," the official told Forum 18 on 3 November. This mahalla has more than 3,000 residents.

The official declined to discuss the way pilgrims are selected or anything else and referred Forum 18 to Shavkatbek (the last name was not given) from Andijan city Hokimat (administration).

Shavkatbek in his turn told Forum 18 on 4 November that he does "not know" how many pilgrims from Andijan City or Region

went on the haj in 2011. He refused to talk to Forum 18, saying that he does "not have any details" on the haj pilgrimage. He also said he was unable to refer Forum 18 to any official who knows such details.

Abdurahman Nazyrkulov, the official overseeing religious affairs in Syrdarya Region, which neighbours Tashkent Region, said that the quota given by the Religious Affairs Committee for his Region is 150. "And this year we sent 150 pilgrims," he told Forum 18 on 3 November. He said he could not comment on whether Syrdarya, which has more than 600,000 inhabitants, is planning to ask the Committee to increase its quota in future years. He put the phone down without answering Forum 18's other questions.

All applicants screened

Each mahalla committee submits to the local administration its list of applicants for the haj. (Mahalla committees, in theory locally-elected but in practice state-appointed, are a key part of Uzbekistan's structures of control and oppression - see F18News 27 March 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=936.) Local administrations, along with the NSS secret police, check each applicant and endorse or reject the application.

Mamedkarimov, Legal Advisor to the Interior Minister, told Forum 18 that haj candidates are screened by law-enforcement agencies to see whether they have criminal records and check whether they will pose any threat during the pilgrimage.

The application, officials of several mahalla committees told Forum 18 on 3 November, is in writing, with a copy of the applicant's passport. The central mahalla of a district compiles a waiting list of applicants. When applicants' turn to go on pilgrimage comes up, they are invited to the local district administration and instructed to collect more documents, including certificates of their place of residence, their health, and a reference letter from their local mahalla committee. The letter gives information about their personal qualities and charitable works.

"There were several officials who gave instructions"

Special instructions are given to successful applicants on how to behave on pilgrimage, including not to talk to foreigners. These instructions are typically given at meetings for all approved pilgrims, such as took place in Tashkent's House of Cinema on 8 October.

Asliddin (who would did not give his last name), the Director of the House of Cinema, told Forum 18 on 4 November that the 800-seat hall was full when the City Administration met with the pilgrims from Tashkent. "There were several officials who gave instructions" to the would-be pilgrims, he said, "and the rest were pilgrims." He said that these were only pilgrims from Tashkent, as the authorities held similar meetings with the other pilgrims in various Districts of Tashkent Region and other Regions. The Director said that he could not say more about the meeting as he did not participate in it.

Tashkent Region and City Administration officials overseeing haj issues refused to talk to Forum 18 on 3 November. Almaridan Karimov of Tashkent Regional Administration on 3 November took down Forum 18's name and questions and then without answering put the phone down. Subsequent calls went unanswered.

"Officials are sent to provide for the security of Uzbek citizens"

Pilgrims have long noted the presence of unexplained additional people accompanying them on the haj. "Officials are sent to provide for the security of Uzbek citizens," Mamedkarimov, Legal Advisor to the Interior Minister, told Forum 18.

Asked why NSS secret police accompany pilgrims and try to ensure they do not mingle and talk with pilgrims from other countries, Mamedkarimov responded: "Uzbekistan is a free country, our citizens are free to talk to anyone."

One Muslim from Tashkent, who has been on the haj, told Forum 18 on 3 November that Uzbek cooks accompanying the Uzbek pilgrims did not prepare food for them, but supposedly were present to ensure that pilgrims would not get food poisoning. Identifiable NSS secret police also accompany the pilgrimage, but the Muslim did not wish to discuss what the NSS officials do, or what they tell pilgrims.

How much does haj cost?

One Mahalla committee worker in Tashkent's Sergeli District, who did not their name, told Forum 18 on 3 November that the official cost of the haj, including the air ticket, food and accommodation, is around 2,500,000 Soms (7,900 Norwegian Kroner, 1,020 Euros, or 1,400 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate).

One mahalla committee official outside Tashkent (who did not wish to publicly state their name or location) on 4 November told Forum 18 that the pilgrims deposit money in a bank account of the local administration. This follows the practice of previous years (see F18News 19 December 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1064). But the official insisted that no "unofficial payments" are made.

However, there have in previous years been suggestions that bribes are also demanded by officials (see F18News 5 December 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1226). The Sergeli Mahalla Committee worker would not comment on these "unofficial payments".

An Imam outside Tashkent, who did not wish to be named for fear of state reprisals, complained that, with "unofficial payments", the cost of a haj pilgrimage is roughly 6,000,000 Soms (18,975 Norwegian Kroner, 2,450 Euros, or 3,380 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate). "It is too much," he lamented to Forum 18 on 3 November. "The number of applicants would be much, much higher if the cost was not so high."

As the imam indicated, these costs are very high indeed for people in Uzbekistan. From 1 August 2011, the official minimum monthly wage has been 57,200 Soms (180 Norwegian Kroner, 23 Euros, or 32 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate).

Human rights defender Surat Ikramov, referring to the unofficial payments, told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 7 November that "there is strong corruption surrounding the Haj". He said those wanting to get on the list almost always have to pay bribes which increase the cost of the Haj significantly. "Especially for older pilgrims, their families often pay without questioning the sums demanded of them. Officials of the Religious Affairs Committee and the Muslim Board are among those who benefit."

"Our mahalla will be able to send pilgrims only in 2012"

Several officials of different mahallas told Forum 18 between 3 and 4 November that Tashkent's Sergeli District has usually been given 33 places on the haj. The District has 33 mahallas, and each mahalla has between 3,000 and 7,000 residents.

But an official of one Sergeli District mahalla, who wished to remain unnamed, told Forum 18 that "our mahalla will be able to send pilgrims only in 2012. Several people are on the waiting list but maybe only one will go." All the applicants are around 60 years old. (Life expectancy in Uzbekistan is a little over 70 years.)

Another mahalla committee chair in Sergeli District, who wished not to be named, said that the last time they sent pilgrims was several years ago, and that they have several applicants whose turn will come up in 2012.

Khakim Jabbarov, the Chair of the Sergeli District Central Mahalla, and officials of Sergeli District Administration declined to discuss the haj with Forum 18. Asked why not send 200 instead of 33 pilgrims from their District, which has roughly 200,000 residents, Jabbarov told Forum 18 on 3 November that "I am not the person who decides this." He refused to give Forum 18 the number of this year's haj pilgrims from the District. Several District officials refused on 3 November to talk to Forum 18, and also said that Batyr Sayislamov, the official who oversees haj issues, was not available to comment. (END)

For a personal commentary by a Muslim scholar, advocating religious freedom for all as the best antidote to Islamic religious extremism in Uzbekistan, see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=338.

For more background, see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1170.

Full reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Uzbekistan can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=33>.

A compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351.

A printer-friendly map of Uzbekistan is available at <http://education.nationalgeographic.com/education/mapping/outline-map/?map=Uzbekistan>.

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