

Fix airfare for non-ballottee Hajj pilgrims at \$ 950

Govt urged at press confce

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Olama-Mashaekh Samonnoy Parishad yesterday urged the government to fix the airfare for non-ballottee hajj pilgrims at US\$950.

The Parishad will form a human chain to be participated by non-ballotee pilgrims wearing 'ehram' (a cloth which they wear at the time of Hajj) at Muktangon in the city from 3.00pm to 4.00pm today to press home their demand.

Speaking at a press conference at Dhaka Reporters Unity auditorium in the city, the parishad leaders urged the government not to create discrimination among the pilgrims calling them ballottee and non-ballottee as they all are

the citizens of the country.

Speaking on the occasion, parishad President Abdul Latif Chowdhury said non-ballottee pilgrims are facing discrimination due to mismanagement of the government.

Mentioning that the pilgrims of Pakistan are paying \$ 750, Malaysians \$ 800 and Indians \$ 750 to \$ 800, he asked the government why will the pilgrims of Bangladeshi have to pay more than \$ 950?

Latif blamed some officials of Biman Bangladesh Airlines and the Ministry of Civil Aviation for raising the airfare for their personal interest.

He said both the ballottee and non-ballottee pilgrims are the citizens of the country, so they have the right to get the

same facilities from the government.

"If the government fails to ensure the same airfare for both categories of pilgrims then it has no right to stay in power," said Latif.

He said the Hajj Agencies Association of Bangladesh (HAAB) has also demanded equal airfare for ballottee and non-ballottee pilgrims and if it declares any movement on this issue, we will support them.

Parishad Advisor Azizur Rahman, General Secretary Wahiduzzaman, Joint Secretary Washim Uddin Nurani, Organising Secretary Principal Masuduzzaman and Secretary General of Khelafat Andolon Jafnullh Khan were present at the press conference.

Print media ignored in Saarc coverage

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newsmen with copies of deliberations by the Saarc leaders as well as the copy of Dhaka Declaration in time.

The media centre, which had over 50 computers and servers with fibre-optic internet link, 10 B/W colour printers, five scanners, six photocopiers, one QSS photo lab, five ISD fax/phones, and five card phones, offered free internet and e-mail facilities for journalists. It also arranged feed transmissions services for international television channels through BTB's earth station. The Press Information Department was in charge of the centre.

The foreign ministry had announced that the journalists covering the summit will be given press kits and necessary documents, but no local journalist was given the kit. An on duty official of the information ministry told local journalists that the government had no plans to provide them with the press kits. Although kits were stacked in piles at the media centre, none was distributed as of

the concluding day.

There was also a media briefing room beside the media centre, but the room apparently was of no use as no press briefing was held there.

The foreign ministry appointed Principal of Foreign Service Academy Jamil Majid as the Saarc spokesperson, but he could not brief the press, as he himself was not aware of any developments.

He was rather sitting around the media centre all along the meet. Either the foreign secretary or the foreign minister was to give him information about the meetings that took place between November 8 and 13.

On the first day's meeting of the Saarc programming committee, DG (Saarc) Ruhul Amin informed the journalists about the outcomes of the meeting on November 9. But Foreign Secretary Hemayetuddin did not brief the media after the crucial Saarc Standing Committee meeting on November 10.

Hemayetuddin sent Additional Foreign Secretary AHM Moniruzzaman to brief the media late in the evening. But Moniruzzaman ended up giving misleading information at the briefing.

His briefing was frustratingly lacking in information. At one stage, he even said that there was no consensus about Afghanistan's membership, which later proved to be the opposite.

After the Council of Ministers meeting on November 11, foreign minister along with Foreign Affairs Advisor Reaz Rahman and Secretary Hemayetuddin showed up at 11:00pm while the journalists had been waiting for briefing since afternoon without any clue to when might the briefing take place.

There was no briefing also after Prime Minister Khaleda Zia's meeting with her Indian and Pakistan counterparts and the Sri Lanka president on November 12. Journalists waited at the media centre till midnight, but to no avail.

Officials at the media centre said everybody was busy having dinner and in the end, none turned up.

Throughout the summit, local journalists had no access to information while the foreign secretary and foreign minister spoke regularly to TV reporters at Dhaka Sheraton Hotel.

The Indian high commission in Dhaka set up a separate media centre for its journalists. Indian Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran briefed them every day during the summit.

Besides Saran, State Minister for External Affairs E Ahamed also briefed the Indian press. Even the Indian prime minister addressed an exclusive press conference for them.

All these kept the Indian journalists up-to-date with the latest developments in the meetings of officials, ministers and heads. It was easy for them to report on various facets of the summit, while Bangladeshi journalists had to confine themselves to covering only inaugural and concluding sessions.

Pakistan High Commission also opened a media centre at Sonargaon Hotel, where Pakistani officials would regularly brief the pressmen from Pakistan.

Nepal did not have any media centre of its own but its officials and ministers regularly briefed the journalists from the Himalayan kingdom.

To cover the inaugural session on November 12, reporters and photographers were asked to assemble by 7:00am at Jatiya Press Club for security passes and transport to go to Bangladesh-China Friendship Conference Centre (BCFCC), the main venue of the summit.

From there, the journalists were taken to the Conference Centre. They were allowed to leave the venue only after the Saarc leaders, ministers, MPs and officials had left the venue. They were not given the copies of the speeches by heads of state and government.

There was no arrangement for drinking water for them at the BCFCC. The security personnel seized water bottles that many of the journalists were carrying with them.

As a result, they had to spend around eight hours without drinking water. When local and foreign journalists asked the security men whether they could have some water, the law enforcers showed them the toilets.

The same happened at the concluding session, which was not less than four hours.

Besides the local journalists, as many as 200 foreign media men came to cover the summit.

‘Resist Monga’

RU CORRESPONDENT

Leaders of the Workers' Party of Bangladesh, Rajshahi unit, yesterday urged people to unite and launch a movement to oust the government.

They held a protest procession on Rajshahi court premises chanting slogans 'Resist monga, reduce prices of essentials and save lives'.

The leaders demanded sufficient relief to the monga- and flood-hit people at the northern districts.

They alleged that the economic policy of the alliance government led to the price hike, bomb blast, murder, terrorism, corruption and damage of industry and agriculture throughout the country.

The leaders also demanded judicial probe and exemplary punishment to the perpetrators of countrywide bomb blasts.