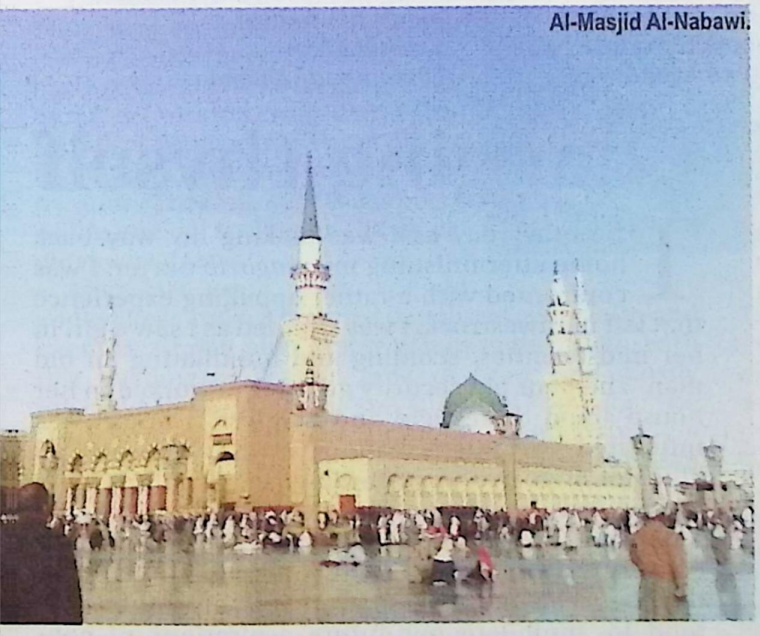
the mouth watering liver curry prepared by the Sudanese. The Nigerians are good at chicken BBQ and French fries. Biryani cooked by the Bangladeshis sold like hot cakes. Strong Arabic coffee and ice creams were available at every corner.

The following morning, we left by road for Arafat after breakfast. Arafat is only 8 km. from Mina. We all became excited at the sight of Jabal ar-Rahmah (the Mount of Mercy) identified by the stone pillar. This is the sight where Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) delivered the Farewell Message after the Hajj. Standing in Arafat ("Akufey Arafah") is an essential part of Haj. Our Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) had said, "Hajj is Arafah". So, literally we became Hajis on reaching Arafat. An estimated 25 lac performed Hajj last year, less than the previous years. About 50 thousand Bangladeshis performed Hajj last year.

Immediately after sunset, we departed by road for Muzdalifah. The barren, rocky mountains formed the panoramic landscape. Due to severe traffic gridlock, it took us ten hours to reach Muzdalifah a distance of only 6-8 km. Staying overnight at Muzdalifah is obligatory. Having said Fazr prayer, trekking towards Mina for almost 4 km. was exhausting .After Zohor prayer, we headed for Jamarat to throw stones at the Shaytans. Throwing stones at the Shaytan for three consecutive days is obligatory.



Al-Masjid Al-Nabawi.

An Inverted -U shaped multi-level walkway (about 4km) has been constructed to facilitate the pilgrims to throw stones at the Shaytans.The one way traffic has greatly facilitated the movement of pilgrims at Jamarat the sight of frequent stampede.

Qurbani was completed in the evening on 10th Zilhaj. There was celebration and excitement and relief at our camp as we drowned ourselves in strong Arabic coffee.

The following day, we performed Umrah Haj in the evening after Esha.

During our stay, we found time to visit Jabal Hira (Mount Hira)- about 5 km.from Makkah.The Revelation of the Holy Quran came to the Prophet (pbuh) in a cave at Hira. We also visited the Al Mu'alla graveyard where religious leaders, scholars and family members of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) including Bibi Khadija are believed to be buried. Before leaving Makkah, we performed Tawaf-ul-Wuda (Farewell Tawaf).

We departed by road for Al-Madinah Al-Munawarrah, 450 km. from Makkah Mukarramah.The barren, rocky mountains interspersed with sandy desert formed the spectacular background. The main purpose of the pilgrims to visit Madinah is to offer 40 waqts prayer and to offer salaam at the Rowja Sharif of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). Madinah is a modern city with trendy malls and hotels. Throughout the year the weather is cool and pleasant. An estimated 6-7 lakh deshis live in Madinah alone. At Madinah, we were lodged at Al Siddique Palace Hotel near Bangali Market, a 5 min. walk from Masjid Nabawi. Signboards in bold Bangla like "New Dhaka Hotel" ,"Barisal Store", "Zamzam Restaurant", "Comilla Store" and "Noakhali Cloth Store " catch one's attention. In fact the Bangali market at Madinah is "Little Bangladesh".

The Prophet's Mosque at Madinah yet another piece of architectural excellence - fully carpeted and centrally air-conditioned can accommodate about 6 lakh pilgrims. The magnificence of the mosque captivates the heart and amazes the mind. I was mesmerized by the beauty and the grandness of the mosque. The two-storied mosque has 41 gates. The ground floor covered with cool, white marble has an area of 82,000 sq.metres.

It was an honour and privilege to pray at Reazul Zannah and Rowza Sharif (the grave of our beloved Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and the grave of Hazrat Abu Bakr Siddique (RA) and Hazrat Umar Ibn al-Khattab (RA). Reazul Zannah (the garden of the gardens of Paradise) is distinguished by the colour of the carpet.

During our stay at Madinah Munawarrah, we seized the opportunity to visit the graveyard of Hazrat Hamza (RA) and sixty-four companions. We also offered two rakat prayers at the Masjid Quba and Masjid al-Qiblatain.Mentionably, Masjid Quba is the first mosque built by Prophet Mohammed (pbuh).

We also visited the six historical mosques adjacent to the Khejur Market (wholesale date market).These include Masjid Billal, Masjid Abu Usman ,Masjid Abu Bakr ,Masjid Umar, Masjid Ali and Gamama Masjid.

After a highly memorable, thought provoking and successful Hajj, we left Al-Madinah Al-Munawarrah by road for Jeddah after Asr prayer. It took almost 7 hours to cover the 410 km. distance. Our sojourn suffered a mild hiccup as our flight was delayed by eight hours. Finally, the big bird flew us home. ■