

#PERSPECTIVE

# Hajj after two years: From despair to hopes of fulfilment for Bangladeshi Hajj pilgrims

Hajj took place in the last two years only for residents of Saudi Arabia on a limited scale, robbing pilgrims from rest of the world, along with Bangladesh, the chance to perform Hajj. With the COVID-19 pandemic now waning thanks to successful vaccination campaigns, Hajj will be performed in full swing this year. But how have the pilgrims, Hajj agencies and businesses coped in these two years?

## After two years of worry comes hope

"We registered two years ago for Hajj, and then came the pandemic and everything was postponed. We hoped last year we could perform Hajj but it was on a limited scale too, leaving us wondering if we can perform Hajj in the near future," said Mosharof Hossain, a retired government official.

Thankfully, those who registered two years ago were able to get the priority among the 57,856 Bangladeshis that will get the chance of performing Hajj this year. But getting the clearance for performing Hajj has some new criteria like proof of COVID-19 vaccination and an age limit of 65 years.

"Hajj expenses have increased significantly, along with the prospect of COVID tests within 72 hours of the flight, I feel nervous as what if we test positive and miss the flight! But at last, we can finally perform Hajj this year and for that I feel very thankful," said Syeda Shirina Islam, a business owner from Dhaka.

## Cautious optimism from Hajj agencies

With the arrival of COVID-19 pandemic, Hajj and Umrah related services were absolutely stopped, incurring huge losses for most agencies, while many went out of business altogether.

"Our business was totally stopped during the first year of pandemic as both Hajj and Umrah couldn't take place. We had some respite after Umrah was allowed from last year, but since most of our earnings are centred on Hajj season, it continued to



be very tough for us," said MD Masum Billah, CEO of Jetway Hajj Group.

Thankfully Hajj is taking place after two years and Hajj agencies have finally got the clearance to get busy with Hajj packages, though they remain cautiously optimistic about the season, considering the restrictions and challenges.

"This year, over 57,000 Bangladeshis will be able to perform Hajj, but the demand is such that we could have sent more than 300,000 people if it was permitted! Even though we are facing problems like significant increase in price for packages, and only three airlines permitted to conduct Hajj flights, we are happy to help people perform Hajj," added MD Masum Billah.

## Time to start anew for businesses

Perhaps no other entity took more losses

than the businesses who sell various Hajj essential items like ihram, abaya, prayer mats and so on during the Hajj season, like those at Baitul Mokarram Shopping Complex and in many retail shops.

"When the pandemic struck, our sales came crashing to a halt. We store our products in a rented facility but when Bangladeshi pilgrims were barred from going to Hajj, our business stopped and we could not pay the rent and had to move the products elsewhere. We closed our shops and only resumed after Umrah started at the end of last year," said a representative of Hajj Essential BD, a retail shop in Mirpur who sell various Hajj essentials.

With Hajj resuming after two years, business have started to rebound, with demand for necessary items like ihram, carry bags, prayers mats very high among other items.

Hajj Essential representative further added, "Our customers have already started ordering for the essential items, we also sell on online and we are hoping we will have a good business this year. We import most of our products so recently, with some disruptions happening in the import process, we are having problems getting our products at the right time, but still we hope customers will be satisfied with our collection of products."

A very limited scale Hajj only for residents of Saudi Arabia caused a domino effect of problems for Bangladeshi pilgrims and business alike. With COVID-19 pandemic significantly waning, everyone is optimistic about this year's Hajj season to be conducted as per the norms.

By Feda Al Hossain

Photo: Star

## Reeling from the recent price hike

Today, I feel like Chicken Licken — the sky has indeed fallen on my head and I believe the world is coming to an end. I thought I am immune to the recent price hike; My god! Was my bubble busted or what? I bought two free range chicken for Tk 1360 from an Uttara local market (free range chicken are Tk 600 per kilogram here in Uttara and Tk 580 in Karwan Bazar).

I have the bad habit of never bothering about the price. I hardly bargain. I feel vendors who are at my doorstep or in the local market are there to make some profit; that is their earning, why should I cut it in half? But today, when I realised

that the two-kilo chicken are the same price as two kilograms of beef, I was shaken.

I started a little check on my monthly budget. I was feeling the pinch in managing the family budget for a while now, but chicken and beef being the same price was like highway robbery in broad daylight and it gave me the shove I needed so badly to make reality checks.

My monthly dry goods bill, which tallies between Tk 10,000 to 12,000 every month is Tk 14,500 this month. I get it done from Kawran Bazar. My mother on the other hand, gets it done from Uttara and her bill

varies from Tk 9,000 to 10,000. It's Tk 12000 this month. And Tk 40,000 (and rising) for chicken, fish, and vegetables, eggs... So, yes, everything is priced high; the extra money that I had from the family budget to run fancy errands are now depleting faster that I can count it.

I never do any panic buy as I think it is a wastage of money. It is giving in to market manipulation and giving in to nasty brokers. And also, because perishable items like onions, potatoes, fish will rot even if they are stored carefully. Thus, whenever the market screams, 'price hike', I stay calm and tell myself that if I can buy seven litres

of oil every month, a Tk 30 or so increase in oil price will not hurt me much.

What I failed to realise is that the hike is a constant thing, it is steadily increasing every month or rather every week it now seems, and never coming down actually. This is definitely burning a hole in my pocket and I take no cognizance of it.

I act as if I am immune to it. For people like me, working and too lenient to count pennies, this market inflation is indeed a wake-up call. Start counting your chickens and pennies from today.

- RBR