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UZBEKISTAN: Over 160 year wait to go on haj pilgrimage?

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

Uzbekistan continues severely restricting the Muslims who can on the haj pilgrimage to Mecca, Forum 18 News Service notes. The state imposes severe restrictions on the numbers of pilgrims and refuses to explain why it does this. People can only get onto the extremely long pilgrimage waiting lists after extensive scrutiny by state agencies including the NSS secret police. Shaira Sadygbekova of Ezgulik human rights organisation has calculated that she will need to live to be 205 years old to reach the top of the waiting list. The head of her mahalla (city district) – one of the agencies which decides who gets onto waiting lists – told Forum 18 that she "will be able to go in 20 or 30 years". Even if people reach the top of the waiting list they may be arbitrarily denied an exit visa to go on pilgrimage. State-run banks often refuse to distribute enough hard currency to pilgrims, according to human rights defenders including Surat Ikramov. A wide variety of state officials have refused to discuss the problems with Forum 18.

Uzbekistan continues to severely restrict the ability of Muslims to go on the haj pilgrimage to Mecca their faith requires, Forum 18 News Service notes. Every able-bodied healthy adult Muslim who can afford to do so is obliged to make a haj, or pilgrimage to Mecca, once in their lifetime.

Yet Uzbekistan imposes severe restrictions on the numbers of pilgrims, severely restricts who can get onto the extremely long pilgrimage waiting lists, arbitrarily alters who can go on the pilgrimage and when they can go, imposes a large financial cost for going on the pilgrimage, and restricts the amount of hard currency that may be exchanged for Soms or even prevents pilgrims receiving the currency they need.

All the state-approved haj pilgrims flew from seven cities of Uzbekistan to Saudi Arabia on state-run Uzbekistan Airways, departing between 3 and 14 September. They are due to return on completion of the haj between 27 September and 8 October.

Severe restrictions on pilgrim numbers

Uzbekistan routinely imposes severe restrictions on how many pilgrims could take part in the annual haj pilgrimage to Mecca in Saudi Arabia. Only 5,080 out of a potential quota of about 28,000 allocated by the Saudi authorities (based on Muslim population numbers) travelled to Mecca in 2011. In 2015 the state Religious Affairs Committee announced that Uzbekistan would send 5,200 pilgrims to Mecca. This is about the average annual figure from Uzbekistan. About as many pilgrims travelled from neighbouring Kyrgyzstan, which has only about one fifth of Uzbekistan's population.

An official of one Uzbek mahalla (local district), with between 3,000 and 7,000 residents, told Forum 18 that "several people are on the waiting list but maybe only one will go". An "unwritten instruction" bans would-be pilgrims under the age of 45 (see F18News 7 November 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1634).

These restrictions are long standing, and the authorities are reluctant to explain why they impose them on Muslims exercising their freedom of religion or belief (see eg. F18News 5 December 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1226).

Asked who decided the 2015 quota for Uzbekistan, Deputy Chief Mufti Haji Abdulaziz Mansurov of the Muslim Board (who has himself made the pilgrimage) told Forum 18 that it was the "decision of Saudi Arabia's Haj Ministry, which decided to give Uzbekistan the quota". He claimed that the "Haj Ministry decided this because there are large-scale repair works undertaken in Haj sites." Haji Mansurov claimed that the Haj Ministry will "give us a quota for 10,000 pilgrims next year."

When Forum 18 asked why Uzbekistan was given a much smaller quota than smaller countries, Mansurov hesitated before responding: "It may be because each country has a special order of its own". Asked what he means by this he did not answer. He then claimed that Uzbekistan will "increase the quota by 5,000 each year until we reach the accepted norm of one pilgrim per 1,000 head of population, i.e., 30,000 pilgrims a few years from now".

Hosni Bostaji, Director General of Saudi Arabia's Office of the Haj Minister declined to comment on the question on 16 September. He asked Forum 18 to send its questions in writing. The Embassy of Saudi Arabia in Uzbekistan's capital Tashkent on 15 September referred Forum 18 to Consul Muhammad Al-Tamimi. Asked whether Saudi Arabia gave the quota of 5,200 to Uzbekistan or

Uzbekistan decided it, Al-Tamimi declined to say. He referred Forum 18 to the Uzbek authorities and did not wish to discuss the issue.

Pilgrims are officially screened. An application to go on the haj is made in writing, with a copy of the applicant's passport. Each mahalla committee submits to the local administration its list of applicants for the haj. Local administrations, along with the National Security Service (NSS) secret police, the state-controlled Muslim Board (the Muftiate) and the state Religious Affairs Committee check each applicant and endorse or reject the application. The central mahalla of a district then compiles a waiting list of applicants (see F18News 7 November 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1634).

Pilgrims can wait for over 160 years

Potential pilgrims may have to wait for many years, and in some cases this may make the pilgrimage impossible due to their age and the very long waiting list (see F18News 7 November 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1634).

"I was 46th on the list, then moved to 146th place, and now I can only go on haj when I am 205," Shaira Sadygbekova, a Muslim and member of the Ezgulik (Goodness) human rights organisation, lamented to Forum 18 on 15 September.

She was put on her mahalla's waiting list in 2007 in 46th place in her local Orikzor Mahalla in Tashkent's Uchteppa District. In 2010 she asked the Mahalla Administration how far she had advanced in the list and was given a certificate, which Forum 18 has seen, that she is 146th on the mahalla's list. She complained about this on 1 May 2012 to Tashkent City Administration's then Deputy Head Nizomiddin Bakhtiyorov, who promised her that she would soon be able to go on haj. "I am still waiting," she told Forum 18.

Sadygbekova noted that, as only one person per year from her mahalla is allowed to go on the haj, she will only be permitted to go on it if she survives to be 205 years old.

Some officials are known to remove or downgrade ordinary people on waiting lists, to allow the officials' friends and relatives to go on the haj instead (see F18News 11 April 2012 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1688). Officials – including from the Muslim Board and the Religious Affairs Committee - are also said to demand bribes for people to be included on the waiting list (see F18News 7 November 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1634).

Abdumazhid Yokubov, Chair of Sadygbekova's mahalla, on 15 September would not comment on why Sadygbekova's place in the waiting was downgraded. He claimed that "each year five or six people go on the haj from our mahalla. [Sadygbekova] will be able to go in 20 or 30 years". Told that she may be dead by then, he replied that "we cannot do anything about it".

Sadygbekova is 59. In 2013 the World Health Organisation estimated female life expectancy in Uzbekistan at 71.8 years. Male life expectancy was estimated at 69.2 years.

Asked why Uzbekistan sends so few pilgrims, Yokubov stated that "I know it's not fair that Uzbekistan should have so few pilgrims but we cannot do anything about it". Asked who decides the quota and how many pilgrims should there be from any mahalla, he referred Forum 18 to Tashkent City Administration. Some mahallas are not allowed to send pilgrims for several years (see F18News 7 November 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1634).

Sadygbekova stated to Forum 18 again that only one person from her mahalla goes on the haj each year, and that Yokubov is "afraid of Tashkent City Administration, and therefore he is lying". She pointed out that "Tashkent Region alone has thousands of mahallas. If each Tashkent mahalla sent five or six pilgrims, this would use up Uzbekistan's total 2015 target of 5,200 pilgrims". She noted that this would mean that "no-one in the rest of Uzbekistan could go on pilgrimage".

At Tashkent City Administration neither Deputy Head Shukhrat Turdikuov, who oversees religious affairs and the haj in Tashkent City, nor his assistant Dilshod Abdrazakov, was willing to discuss the issue on 15 September. Shovkat Hamdamov, Press Secretary of the Religious Affairs Committee, was also unwilling on 15 September to explain why the numbers of pilgrims and the organisation of the haj must be controlled by the state.

Even pilgrims at top of waiting lists refused pilgrimage places

When – or if - 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 (see F18News 7 November 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1634).

Even successful passage of this process does not guarantee a haj pilgrimage. Uzbekistan uses exit visas – a Soviet-era idea - to control which of its citizens are allowed to leave the country. Citizens need an exit visa every two years to visit any other country apart from several former Soviet republics. The NSS secret police maintains an exit ban list – for example of human rights defenders – who may not be allowed to travel (see F18News 7 November 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1634).

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. NSS secret police officers reportedly accompany the haj pilgrims.

It is also said in Uzbekistan that successful applicants are arbitrarily removed from the pilgrimage and replaced with the friends or family members of officials. An Imam outside Tashkent, who did not wish to be named for fear of state reprisals, complained in 2011 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 stated (see F18News 7 November 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1634).

Large cost of state-controlled pilgrimages

Pilgrims are not permitted to arrange their haj travel privately and must pay the state the large sum of 9,600,000 Soms for organisation of the pilgrimage, including travel, hotel, food and medical insurance, Deputy Head of the Muslim Board Mansurov told Forum 18 on 16 September. He could not give a breakdown of how this figure is calculated. (The official minimum monthly wage is 130,240 Soms, about 400 Norwegian Kroner, 45 Euros or 50 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate.)

Asked why the state must control every part of the pilgrimage and who goes on it, and whether this is a violation of pilgrims' freedom of religion or belief, Mansurov denied this. "It is better if it is organised by the state," he responded, "then we make sure that every pilgrim gets their needs met and that everybody returns to Uzbekistan without getting into trouble."

Sadygbekova of Ezgulik, who together with her husband went on the also state-organised umra pilgrimage to Mecca in 2013, stated that "if we could arrange pilgrimage privately we could spend much less and stay in Saudi Arabia in far better conditions". For the 9,600,000 Soms they paid, pilgrims "only got a cheap hotel and poor food". She stated that it would have been more economical were pilgrims allowed to change hotels and eat wherever they wanted. She added that even the 9,600,000 Soms paid did not cover everything claimed, as pilgrims also had to pay the state-run Uzbekistan Airways 200 US Dollars for excess baggage weighing 20 kilograms.

The umra or "minor pilgrimage" to Mecca is - unlike the haj - not compulsory or restricted to a particular month, but it is recommended for devout Muslims. Strict controls on who may go on the umra pilgrimage are also applied (see F18News 19 December 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1064).

Financial restrictions also imposed

Pilgrims have again this year been unable to receive the hard currency they need for the pilgrimage from banks, according to Sadygbekova of Ezgulik, human rights defender Surat Ikramov, and other sources in various regions of the country who did not wish to be named for fear of state reprisals.

This difficulty of access to hard currency has existed for several years (see F18News 7 November 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1634).

This year, for example, state-run banks in Jizak Region refused to give out hard currency to pilgrims, a source in the region who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 14 September. In early August pilgrims asked banks such as the Jizak branch of the Xalq Banki [People's Bank] to give them US Dollars in exchange for Soms.

Dilshod (last name unknown), the local Director of the bank, "demanded the pilgrims leave copies of their passports and wait for a call". But no call came and no currency was distributed up to the 14 September end of the despatch of pilgrims from Uzbekistan.

Sayfiddin Ismailov, Head of Jizak Region's Administration, on 5 September "gathered heads of banks in Jizak and told them not to give out more than 700 US Dollars to each pilgrim instead of the 2,000 Dollars promised", the source told Forum 18. The source said they personally knew of 12 pilgrims who came from Jizak Region and the total may be between 100 and 150. The source had heard that "many pilgrims face the same problem".

Pilgrims in Tashkent also similar difficulty getting the necessary amount of hard currency from banks, human rights defenders Ikramov and Sadygbekova complained. Most pilgrims in Tashkent Region were only given "between 500 and 700 Dollars", they added.

Why did state banks not give out enough hard currency?

Dilshod of Xalq Banki in Jizak (who refused to give his last name) on 8 September refused to state why his bank refused to give enough hard currency to pilgrims. "Who are you and why do you ask this question to me?" he asked Forum 18. He then put the phone down. Subsequent calls to the bank on the same day and later days went unanswered.

Asked why the Head of Jizak Administration Ismailov instructed banks not to give out more than 700 US dollars, his Assistant Burabay (who would not give his last name) told Forum 18 on 8 September that he is "surprised that the pilgrims did not ask Ismailov but told Forum 18".

Ismailov through his Assistant told Forum 18 that his Deputy Eshtemir Ismatov is "taking care of the problem". When Forum 18 asked whether this meant that each pilgrim will be able to exchange Soms for up to 2,000 US dollars, Assistant Burabay could not answer.

Called several times on 9 and 10 September Ismatov's Assistant (who would not give his name) told Forum 18 that Ismatov is "busy and not available". He also refused to comment on the case. Told that Forum 18 cannot reach Ismatov, Jizak Administration referred Forum 18 to Nurali Rahimov, Ismatov's subordinate, who oversees the organisation of haj. From 10 September onwards Rahimov steadfastly refused to explain the reasons for the administration's actions to Forum 18. (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=1862.

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 is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351.

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