

Mecca to be expanded to accommodate 50 lakh Hajjis

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With the number of pilgrims visiting Mecca during Hajj soaring every year, the Saudi Arabia has launched a number of development projects to avoid stampede and overcrowding while expanding the Grand Mosque to accommodate an additional 10 lakh worshippers, according to zeenews.com

The current structure covers an area of 400,800 square metres including the outdoor and indoor praying spaces and can accommodate up to 40 lakh worshippers including more than 1.6 lakh Indians during the Hajj period, the largest annual gathering of people in the world which is scheduled for December this year.

The symbolic stoning of Satan at Mina in Mecca, where in the past hundreds of pilgrims have died as a result of stampedes and overcrowding, is expected to no longer be a nightmarish with the construction of a three-storey bridge to make the process easier and smooth during Hajj.

The new bridge with its 10 large entrances and similar number of exits and designed to accommodate 50 lakh pilgrims in a span of three days will make crowds easier to handle, a local cleric said.

The development projects include expansion of grand mosque to create an additional space for nearly 10 lakh worshippers and the expansion of the Massa, the area between mount Safa and mount Marwa located inside the premises of the mosque which surrounds the holy Kabba.

"The development of Mecca should be an exceptional one. It should be different from that of any other city because of its religious significance and at the same time its cultural identity should be protected," Mecca Governor Prince Khaled Al-Faisal recently told a UN team involved in preparing a comprehensive development plan for holy cities.

The Saudi government has injected several million dollars to develop Mecca and Medina into beautiful modern cities with advanced facilities with retaining at the same time their cultural identities.

The UN team will review the development plans for Mecca, Medina and the holy sites, being prepared by a Canadian consultancy firm.

The expansion of the Massa would play a big role in reducing the difficulties faced by the pilgrims when they perform the rituals of running between the two mountains seven times during Hajj, said Mohammad Abid, a worker involved in cleaning the Massa area.

The government is also planning to set up about USD 2 billion monorail connecting Mecca with Mina, Arafat and Muzdalifah -- all holy sites close to the grand mosque.

The project is expected to be fully operational by 2011. The government has signed a deal in this regard with Chinese Railway company early this year.

Besides, the spread of swine flu has prompted the government to take extra precautionary measures to protect the visitors during Hajj. "The Ministry of Hajj is in regular touch with the Ministry of Health to obtain all instructions and precautionary measures against the flu so that the Hajj missions in various countries can instruct their pilgrims accordingly," Hajj Minister Fouad Al-Farsy has been quoted as saying in local media.

The Saudi government has also issued directives urging old age persons, pregnant women, children and patients to avoid coming to Hajj this year because of swine flu. It has asked the pilgrims to get themselves vaccinated against seasonal flu before coming to the kingdom.

According to the mosque workers and shopkeepers, during this Ramadan the number of pilgrims visiting Mecca to perform Umra was 30 per cent less than the last year's figure for the same period. Some countries like Iran, Iraq, Egypt had banned people from visiting Mecca during Ramadan.

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