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UZBEKISTAN: Why does government restrict haj numbers?

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

It remains unclear why the Uzbek government is limiting the number of adult Muslims who can go on the haj, or pilgrimage, to Mecca that Islam requires. This year, only 4,200 of the more than 6,000 Uzbek citizens who wanted to make the pilgrimage were permitted to go, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. The numbers are controlled under an agreement between Saudi Arabia and Uzbekistan, by which the Saudis only issue haj visas to Uzbeks whose names are on a list drawn up by representatives of the state Committee for Religious Affairs and the state-controlled muftiate, or Islamic religious leadership. Uzbek state control is further ensured as, unlike in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, where haj pilgrims can travel privately, Uzbek Muslims have to travel to Saudi Arabia by air using only the state-run Uzbek Airways. This cost of these flights is prohibitively expensive for most Uzbeks. The minority Shia Muslim community also experiences problems in making the haj with Sunnis.

Every adult Muslim who can afford to is obliged by their faith to make a haj, or pilgrimage to Mecca, once in their lifetime. But the Uzbek government's Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA) has only allowed 4,200 of the more than 6,000 Uzbek citizens who this year wanted to make the pilgrimage to go, an Uzbek Muslim who preferred not to be named told Forum 18 News Service. The government is able to control the numbers who make the haj under an agreement between the Saudi and Uzbek governments, by which the Saudi embassy in Uzbekistan will issue visas for the haj pilgrimage only to Uzbeks whose names are on a list drawn up by a committee of representatives of the CRA and the state-controlled muftiate, or Islamic religious leadership. Saudi Arabia's embassies in other countries will not issue visas for the haj to Uzbek citizens.

The Uzbek pilgrims flew from the capital Tashkent to Medina (the airport for Mecca) between 5 and 12 January, joining more than two million other Muslims from around the world.

Radio Free Europe's Uzbek service reported complaints from local Muslims that some muftiate officials sought bribes of up to 500 US dollars (529,450 Uzbek soms, 3,110 Norwegian kroner, or 380 Euros) to be included on the list of pilgrims, allegations which officials denied.

State control is further ensured as, unlike in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, where haj pilgrims can use privately-arranged transport, Uzbek Muslims have to travel to Saudi Arabia by air using the state-run Uzbek Airways. This year, the cost to an Uzbek citizen going on the haj, including flights, is 2,260 US dollars (2,393,453 Uzbek soms, 14,063 Norwegian kroner, or 1,726 Euros). Given that the average monthly wage in Uzbekistan is less than 50 US dollars (52,945 Uzbek soms, 311 Norwegian kroner, or 38 Euros), this is a huge sum for local Muslims.

In neighbouring Kyrgyzstan, private tourist companies have this year offered haj journeys by bus for 1,000 US dollars.

"Kyrgyzstan's cheaper prices and the absence of state controls mean that many Uzbek citizens are buying fake Kyrgyz passports in Kyrgyzstan and using them to make the haj pilgrimage to Mecca," human rights activist Ahmajon Madmarov told Forum 18 on 16 January from Margelan, a city in Uzbekistan's section of the Fergana [Farghona] valley. "But this is a very risky course, because travelling with a false passport is a criminal offence under both Uzbek and Kyrgyz laws."

Uzbek state control of haj pilgrimages causes problems for the country's Shiite Muslims, estimated at around 300,000, mainly ethnic Iranians in the south of Uzbekistan. Sunni customs are markedly different from those of Shiite Muslims, and Uzbek Shiites making the haj have problems because of the rituals followed by the majority Sunnis (see F18News 27 April 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=307).

The deputy head of Uzbekistan's CRA, Shukhrat Ismailov, said that Saudi Arabia had set a quota for each country's residents who wished to make the haj pilgrimage, at 1,000 people per million residents of a country. Uzbekistan, whose population is over 25 million, has a quota of over 25,000. "But the problem is that in our state the number of those wishing to make the haj pilgrimage has never exceeded 4,000," he told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 17 January as an explanation for the state's refusal to allow some Uzbeks to make the haj pilgrimage. "We could not predict that the number of those wishing to make the pilgrimage would be so big. In August 2004 on the basis of previous years we asked the Saudi embassy to give us a quota of 4,000."

However, Ismailov admitted that Uzbeks can only travel on the haj by Uzbek Airways and that a special committee of members of

the muftiate and the CRA decides who can travel. "We are opposed to people travelling using private companies, as is the practice in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan," he told Forum 18. "These companies often cheat people. We also feel that haj journeys by bus or car are not without danger and so we do not allow Uzbek citizens to do this. We do not prevent our citizens from making the haj pilgrimage, but we decide it at a state level."

Ismailov added that he had not heard anything about Uzbek Shiites' problems in going on the haj. "They have never complained to us, and so it didn't enter our heads to make separate arrangements for them," he said.

Ismailov reported that in 2005, unlike in previous years, the role of the mahalla (local administration) in approving pilgrims has been abolished. In the past, those who wished to make the pilgrimage had to provide a reference from the committee of the mahalla where they lived. Although the mahalla leadership is formally elected by local residents, in practice it is appointed by the government and is often used as an instrument of state control. In previous years, each mahalla was allocated a quota for the numbers permitted to go on the haj dependent on the number of residents.

Ismailov confirmed that no quota was set this year for the number of pilgrims from individual mahallas and no reference from the mahalla committees was required in order to make the haj. Independent Muslims confirmed this to Forum 18.

But despite the removal of mahalla controls, it is clear that the Uzbek government has retained tight control over the haj and who may go on it, and has limited the number of Muslims who can make the pilgrimage required by their faith. (END)

For background information, see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom

survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=105 .

A printer-friendly map of Uzbekistan is available at

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=uzbeki>

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