

**Haj charges to go up by 36pc, Senate panel told**

ISLAMABAD: Haj charges for government-sponsored scheme 2019 have been increased by more than 36 per cent because of devaluation of rupee and new taxes imposed by Saudi Arabia, the Senate Standing Committee on Religious Affairs was informed.

A meeting of the committee, held here recently, was presided over by Senator Abdul Ghafoor Haideri of Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam-Fazl. It was briefed on Haj arrangements. The pilgrimage is expected to take place in early August.

Secretary of Religious Affairs Mohammad Mushtaq Ahmed informed the committee that according to calculations charges of the government-sponsored Haj scheme would go up by around Rs156,000 per head.

He said charges for a pilgrim departing from Lahore would be Rs436,935 while the one departing from Karachi would be Rs426,975.

The committee was informed that due to appreciation in the value of the dollar against the rupee charges of everything had gone up while the Saudi government had also increased taxes on food items imported from different countries.

Senator Haideri taunted that 'commission' too might have been increased, adding the point to be noted was that in neighbouring countries such as India and Iran, flight charges had not been increased.

"Why do we have all issues that create problems for ordinary citizens?" the chairman asked.

The committee was informed that the Saudi government had increased the Haj quota for Pakistan by 5,000 pilgrims and the government of Pakistan has signed an agreement with Saudi authorities for the departure of 184,210 Haj pilgrims this year.

The committee directed the ministry to renegotiate flight charges with airlines and devise ways to reduce expenses in the overall Haj package.

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