

**Senate panel expresses reservations over increase in Hajj package**

ISLAMABAD: The Senate Standing Committee on Religious Affairs on Wednesday expressed serious reservations over the increase in Rs 105,000 in the government Hajj scheme package for 2020.

The meeting chaired by Maulana Abdul Ghafoor Haideri directed the religious affairs ministry to justify the increase in Hajj expenditures.

The senators said the ministry was increasing the cost of the Haj package every year, making it difficult for the poor to perform the religious obligation.

Briefing the panel Ministry of Religious Affairs and Interfaith Harmony Secretary Mushtaq Ahmed said that this year 179,000 Pakistanis would perform Hajj and the government package's cost would be increased by Rs105,000 per person.

He said that there were multiple reasons behind the increase in Hajj expenditures but depreciation of Pakistani rupee had pushed the cost by up to Rs 40,000 per pilgrim.

Moreover, the secretary added that the Saudi government had added an additional fee of Saudi riyal 300 for every visa and Saudi riyal 110 for compulsory health insurance.

He said that the return air ticket through Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) or Saudi Airlines cost around Rs140,000 per person and every pilgrim would have to pay Rs24,200 for sacrificial animals, which was not included in the Hajj package.

The panel directed the Ministry of Religious Affairs to request the government of reducing Hajj air fares.

Committee member Raja Zafarul Haq said that normal return air ticket of PIA or Saudi airline costs Rs 55,000 to Rs 60,000 but Hajj return ticket costs Rs140,000 which was almost three times high.

Other members also asked the religious minister to make arrangements for a reduction in Hajj air tickets charges.

The committee decided to invite PIA and Saudi Airline officials to brief the panel on expensive ticket charges, saying at least Rs40,000 Haj expenditure can be reduced by bringing down the travel charges.

The secretary told lawmakers that the ministry had returned Rs5 billion to the pilgrims who performed Haj through the government programme last year.

Each pilgrim was returned between Rs37,000 and Rs60,000, he informed.

The committee expressed its dismay over the inability of the secretary to respond to certain queries.

Moreover, the panel also expressed anger with the Minister for Religious Affairs and Interfaith Harmony Noorul Haq Qadri, saying the panel kept on sending you request to attend the meeting but the minister did not listen.

Responding to the panel, Qadri apologized and said that he failed to attend the meetings due to his Hajj-related engagements in Saudi Arabia.

The religious affairs minister reassured that efforts were being made by the government to reduce the burden on the pilgrims this year, adding that pilgrims who performed Haj last year, were reimbursed Rs5.5 billion.

He said that 22,000 Pakistani pilgrims benefited from the Road to Makkah project in 2019, and talks were ongoing to extend the project to other major cities - Karachi, Lahore, Peshawar and Quetta.

A quota of 1,000 people has been allocated for overseas Pakistanis and citizens over the age of 70 who would be sent without balloting.

An office would be set up with the Saudi Haj Ministry to immediately address any issues faced by the pilgrims.

"Direct flights from Quetta to Jeddah and Medina would be made operational this year, as well as temporary camps will be set up for pilgrims from Gilgit-Baltistan," he said.