

Saudi Arabia to allow around 1,000 pilgrims in scaled-down Haj

RIYADH: Saudi Arabia on Tuesday said only around 1,000 pilgrims of various nationalities already in the kingdom will be allowed to perform a dramatically scaled-down Haj, as it battles a coronavirus surge.

The decision to exclude pilgrims outside Saudi Arabia, a first in the kingdom's modern history, sparked disappointment among Muslims worldwide even as many accepted it was necessary due to the health risks involved.

The reduced number is a far cry from the 2.5 million who attended the five-day ritual last year and it remains unclear what the selection process will be for this year's Haj, scheduled for the end of July.

"The number of pilgrims will be around 1,000, maybe less, maybe a little more," Haj Minister Mohammad Benten told reporters in Riyadh.

"The number won't be in tens or hundreds of thousands" this year, he added.

The pilgrimage will be limited to those below 65 years of age and with no chronic illnesses, Health Minister Tawfiq al-Rabiah said.

The pilgrims will be tested for coronavirus before arriving in the holy city of Makkah and will be required to quarantine at home after the ritual, Rabiah added.

The Saudi decision to hold a "very limited" Haj is fraught with political and economic peril and comes after several Muslim nations pulled out of the ritual that forms one of the main pillars of Islam.

The Haj — a must for able-bodied Muslims at least once in their lifetime — could be a major source of contagion, as it packs millions of pilgrims into congested religious sites.

The decision comes as Saudi Arabia grapples with a major spike in infections, which have now risen to more than 161,000 cases — the highest in the Gulf — with more than 1,300 deaths.

"Saudi Arabia has chosen the safest option that allows it to save face within the Muslim world while making sure they are not seen as compromising on public health," Umar Karim, a visiting fellow at the Royal United Services Institute in London, said.

Saudi Arabia has said the Haj will be open to people of various nationalities already in the kingdom, without specifying how many Saudis will be permitted or what the selection process will be.

But Banten said the government will work with various diplomatic missions in the kingdom to select foreign pilgrims residing in Saudi Arabia who fit the health criteria.

The decision has disappointed Muslim pilgrims around the world who often invest their life savings and endure long waiting lists to make the trip.

"My hopes of going to (the holy city of Makkah) were so high," said Kamariah Yahya, 68, from Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim nation, which had already barred its citizens from the Haj earlier this month.

"I've been preparing for years. But what can I do? This is Allah's will — it's destiny."

In a statement that gave the decision the cover of religious sanction, the Saudi-based Muslim World League said it endorsed the government move for the health and safety of pilgrims, according to state media. The prestigious Islamic institution Al-Azhar in Cairo also welcomed the move, calling it "wise and based on Islamic jurisprudence".

And Youssef Al-Othaimeen, secretary general of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, said in a statement carried by state media that he "appreciated the utmost care given... to the health and safety of the pilgrims".

But the decision still risks annoying hardline Muslims for whom religion trumps health concerns.

Ahmed al-Khoury, a Jordanian resident of Riyadh, shrugged off the coronavirus health warnings, telling this news agency he saw "no reason" to cancel or limit the pilgrimage.

A scaled-down Haj represents a major loss of revenue for the kingdom, already reeling from the twin shocks of the virus-induced slowdown and a plunge in oil prices.

The smaller year-round Umrah pilgrimage was already suspended in March.

Together, they add \$12 billion to the Saudi economy every year, according to government figures.