

**S. Arabia agreed to end Umrah tax on Pakistanis, Senate panel told**

ISLAMABAD: The Senate Standing Committee on Religious Affairs was informed on Tuesday that Prime Minister Imran Khan had requested Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman Al Saud to waive 2,000 riyals tax imposed by the Saudi government on Pakistanis performing Umrah every year.

The committee, presided over by Senator Maulana Abdul Ghafoor Haideri, was briefed about the problems faced by Pakistanis while performing Haj and Umrah.

The chairman of the committee said he had received several complaints about the Saudi government imposing a tax of 2,000 riyals on pilgrims performing more than one Umrah within two years.

"I have been informed that this was some kind of a discriminatory tax on Pakistanis and the government should do something about it," Senator Haideri said.

Secretary of Religious Affairs Muhammad Mushtaq said that the rationale behind the Saudi move was to discourage repeated Umrah by a few people only and the tax had not been levied on Pakistanis only but it had recently been imposed on anyone coming from any country of the world.

"However this new tax of 2,000 riyals on people performing more than one Umrah within two years has been abolished for the people of Egypt and Turkey after requests were made by governments of these countries to the Saudi government," Mr Mushtaq said.

He said that the matter had been taken up with the Saudi authorities in Islamabad and it was suggested that Prime Minister Imran Khan should make the request to the Saudi crown prince for the tax waiver.

"The prime minister during his visit to Saudi kingdom took up the matter with the Saudi crown prince and he has agreed to abolish the tax," the secretary said, adding that it was a matter of time and the Saudi government would notify the waiver soon.

Some senators, however, criticised the prime minister's move saying it would benefit only a few rich people who wanted to perform Umrah every year.

The committee was informed about Haj operations 2018 and was told that the ministry of religious affairs would start preparations for Haj operations 2019 in January.

Senator Sajid Mir demanded that the draft of Haj Policy 2019 should be presented to the committee first, but Minister for Religious Affairs Minister Noorul Haq Qadri said that the committee could only forward its suggestions to the government as amendments to the Haj Policy of 2018.

Several senators criticised arrangements made by the government for Haj pilgrims last year.

The chairman of the committee, Senator Haideri, told the meeting that he had performed Haj almost every year on a special quota granted by the Saudi ambassador.

"I have seen more mismanagement only on Pakistan's side than any other country," he said.

He also asked the religious ministry to explain the reason why only army men were required for medical care of Haj pilgrims during Haj.

He suggested the religious ministry to seek applications for the medical mission from provinces and the federal government also.

The Newspaper's Staff Reporter