

Kyrgyz Pilgrims Say Haj Travel Still Badly Run

Author: [IWPR Central Asia](#)

Some of those going on the Haj to Mecca complain that farming out travel arrangements to commercial firms has led to high prices and poor service.

Muslims in Kyrgyzstan making the Haj or pilgrimage to Mecca say the revised travel arrangements following the scandals of past years are still making this once-in-a-lifetime trip problematic and too expensive.

The State Commission for Religious Affairs – a government agency – was charged with organising this year’s Haj after a series of mishaps that dogged earlier pilgrimages run by the Muslim Board, the official clerical establishment. (See [Pilgrims’ Protest in Kyrgyzstan](#), RCA No. 474, 8-Dec-06.)

In the run-up to the Haj week, which begins in Saudi Arabia this week, the government commission said designated private tourist firms would be allowed to offer travel deals.

One result of the change is that for the first time, many pilgrims have been able to go to Mecca by air rather than overland, avoiding the frequent road incidents that killed 22 people from Kyrgyzstan just in the last Haj, which fell in January 2007.

But many pilgrims are up in arms over the number of places allocated for the Haj, which the government set at 4,500, and at the prices they are being asked to pay.

One pilgrim from the Jalalabad region in southern Kyrgyzstan, who wished to remain anonymous, told IWPR he was initially told he would be able to go to Mecca, and he duly paid over the money for the trip.

But the tour company later told him there were “visa problems” and his trip was cancelled. He is angry, as he will not be able to pay for another Haj trip next year.

This year, 17 of the 21 tourist firms that placed bids to run Haj trip won the right to do so. The 4,500 places – a quota set by the Kyrgyz government – were distributed among them.

The Muslim Board decided which pilgrims would be allowed to go, through its network of regional branches and mosque prayer leaders or imams.

Many imams feel the Muslim Board should have been given the right to make all the Haj arrangements, just as it did last year. They say the organisation is aware of the details and sensitivities surrounding the pilgrimage, and some say it is less prone to corruption than the tour companies.

Gupronidin-Aji Zukhriddinov, the imam of a village mosque in Jalalabad region, complained that the commercial firms involved in the Haj this year were insufficiently familiar with the requirements of Islam and sharia law.

“They don’t know what the Haj is, in the full sense of the word,” he said.

The imam also complained about the cost, saying, “Many people can’t afford the Haj because of the high prices.”

In 1995, people could go on the Haj by bus for 500 US dollars, whereas this year, the standard price was 1,800 dollars – partly as a result of “additional services introduced by the [tourist] agencies”, he said.

“The intermediaries are the problems behind the price surge. There is both corruption and bribe-taking,” the imam asserted.

Shamshibek Zakirov, a member of the government commission, agreed there had been problems with some of the tour companies, noting that “some firms have a lot of experience and some have only just started”.

He said the price range was reasonable for Central Asia. “Compared with neighbouring states, we have cheaper prices,” he said. “The Haj is for those who are wealthy.”

Such claims look unlikely to defuse the row, however.

Imam Zuhridinov is unhappy with the notion of Muslims being transported to Mecca exclusively by plane. They should instead be free to choose their mode of transport - “plane or cart”, he said.

Kanybek Tagaev, spokesman for the Muslim Board’s branch in Jalalabad, noted that there been problems with ensuring that places went to the most deserving pilgrims. His fellow clerics had submitted a list based on each applicant’s individual merit, as the government commission had asked them to do, but local travel companies went ahead with collecting applications and passports without reference to anyone else.

Meanwhile, the commission set a quota of 1,080 people for Jalalabad and rejected 120 people for reasons Tagaev felt were unclear.

“Religion and business are different things. Businessmen should not be allowed to do this [organise the Haj],” Tagaev concluded.

Asan Saipov, secretary of the Board of Muslims, also claimed the commission had failed to ensure that travel firms distributed travel permits fairly.

“There was a lack of transparency in the distribution of these vouchers, and that was the commission’s fault,” he said. “Every year the commission ... fails to protect the rights of the devout.”

Saipov believes that the Muslim Board should be put back in charge of organising the Haj, with the state

merely lending a helping hand. “The Haj is not tourism. Pilgrimages must be organised by people who are competent in the area of sharia law,” he said.

Although critics claim at least 2,000 hopefuls were excluded from the pilgrimage, Zakirov, of the government commission, defended the quota set by the authorities.

“A quota of 4,500 people is sufficient for Kyrgyzstan,” he said. “Anyone who is interested can go.”

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