

Muslim pilgrims pray on Mount Arafat in hajj climax

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Online Desk :

More than 1.5 million Muslims will pray on Mount Arafat in soaring temperatures on Saturday, in the high-point and most gruelling day of the annual hajj pilgrimage. Worshippers from all over the world will climb the rocky, 70-metre (230-feet) hill, about 20 kilometres (12 miles) from Mecca, where the Prophet Mohammed is believed to have given his last sermon. The desert summer heat is expected to hit 43 degrees Celsius (109.4 degrees Fahrenheit), creating challenges especially among the elderly during a day of prayer and reciting the Koran.

The hajj, which takes at least five days to complete and is mostly outdoors, “is not easy because it is very hot”, said Abraman Hawa, 26, from Ghana. “We have sun... but it is not as hot. But I will pray to Allah at Arafat, because I need his support,” she added. Saudi authorities have urged pilgrims to drink plenty of water and protect themselves from the sun. Since men are prohibited from wearing hats, many carry umbrellas.

More than 10,000 heat-related illnesses were recorded last year, 10 percent of them heat stroke, a Saudi official told AFP this week. The hajj, one of the world’s biggest religious gatherings, is increasingly affected by climate change, according to a Saudi study that said regional temperatures were rising 0.4C each decade. But Mohammed Farouk, a 60-year-old Pakistani pilgrim, was not put off by the Gulf kingdom’s scorching summer sun. The hajj is “very important for me as a Muslim”, he said.

– Financial windfall –

The enormous crowds of worshippers spent the night in a giant tented city in Mina, a valley several kilometres outside Mecca, Islam’s holiest city. Many of them were tightly packed in the air-conditioned tents, lying close together on narrow mattresses. They were grouped by nationality and price, depending on how much they had paid for their hajj packages — usually several thousand dollars. After Arafat they will head to Muzdalifah, where they will collect pebbles to carry out the symbolic “stoning of the devil” ritual in Mina on Sunday.

The hajj is said to follow the path of the Prophet Mohammed’s final pilgrimage, about 1,400 years ago. It is an important source of legitimacy for the Al Saud dynasty, whose monarch has the title “guardian of the two holy mosques”, in Mecca and Medina. It is also a major financial windfall for the conservative country, which is trying to develop religious tourism as part of a drive to reduce its dependence on crude oil.

The kingdom received more than 1.8 million pilgrims last year for the hajj, around 90 percent of whom came from abroad. It also welcomed 13.5 million Muslims who came to perform Umrah, the small pilgrimage that can be done all year round, and aims to reach 30 million by 2030. This year’s hajj takes place in the shadow of the Gaza war, after eight months of bloodshed that is an open wound for many in the Muslim world.