**Pakistan to return Rs 97,000 to each hajj pilgrim**

Pakistan's Religious Affairs Ministry would return a cumulative sum Rs 12 billion to tens of thousands of Pakistani pilgrims, who performed Hajj this year through the government sponsored scheme.

It was announced the country's Religious Affairs Minister Senator Muhammad Talha Mehmood on Thursday, reports the Express Tribune of Pakistan.

Addressing a press conference on the government's Hajj arrangements in Saudi Arabia, the minister said due to effective cost-saving measures, the pilgrims were set to receive a partial refund in their Hajj expenses in their respective bank accounts next week.

The press conference came a week before the culmination of the government Hajj operation, which ends on next Wednesday with the arrival of the last return Hajj flight. This year, more than 1,60,000 Pakistanis performed Hajj, he said, adding Pakistan got the quota of 1,79,210 pilgrims for next year.

The minister said each pilgrim would get the refund of Rs97,000. He added that 22,600 pilgrims could not get a place in Mina or avail the train facility. "They will be refunded an additional amount of Rs 21,000 per person," he said.

"Similarly, 18,000 pilgrims, residing outside Markazia in Madina will be refunded an additional amount of Rs14,000 per person," the minister continued.

"This is the pilgrims' own money which is being returned to them," he disclosed.

"Those who faced difficulties in securing accommodations in Madina would be refunded Rs111,000, those who could not use the Mashair Train to be reimbursed Rs118,000, and the pilgrims who had to stay far from the central locations in Madina will receive Rs132,000 as compensation," he said.

Explaining the reasons, the minister said that many buildings in Markazia had been demolished by the Saudi government, which including the two buildings of the Pakistan House. Because of that "we had to get residential buildings away" from Markazia, he added.

However, the minister stressed that 78% of the pilgrims were accommodated in close proximity to the holy sites in Madina, 63% of the pilgrims were provided with the convenience of the Mashair Train to travel to Mina, while 47% enjoyed their stay in old Mina.

"This year, the amount of Hajj package was Rs 1.165 million for the southern region and Rs 1.175 million for the northern region. "We already have refunded Rs 55,000 per person [Rs 4.5 billion] to the government scheme pilgrims. We will return every penny to the pilgrims."

He reiterated the government's commitment to the welfare of the pilgrims. He said that a total of approximately Rs 16.5 billion was being allocated for reimbursements to the pilgrims under the government's Hajj package.

The minister said that the government wanted the next year's Hajj cost less and that the pilgrims faced no hardship. The Hajj expenditure increased because pf the increase in the value of the dollar against the rupee. Despite this, we have made the cheapest Hajj by making great efforts."

In response to a question, Mahmood said that he was deeply disappointed with the private Hajj operators, who took Rs 2.5 million from each pilgrim but did not provide them the promised services in the holy land. "We have decided to immediately hear the complaints."