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## The Hajj, 2010

By

Sonia Roy

On 31 March 2010 India signed an agreement in Riyadh with Saudi Arabia enabling its pilgrims to perform this year's Hajj. Minister of Hajj Fouad Al-Farsy and India's Minister of State for External Affairs Shashi Tharoor signed the deal. Tharoor was accompanied by Members of Parliament Mohsina Kidwai and Madani Mahmood Hussain and Indian Ambassador Talmiz Ahmad.<sup>1</sup> While expressing his gratitude to the Kingdom for regularly making elaborate arrangements for the annual pilgrimage and facilitating Indian pilgrims, Tharoor added that the Indian government and its local diplomatic mission have been overseeing the arrangements for its pilgrims since the 1880s. 'We thus have 130 years of experience in making arrangements for our Hajj pilgrims,' he added.<sup>2</sup> The agreement included arrangements for pilgrims' accommodation in Mecca and Medina, aside from air travel, health care and various welfare measures. It also covered air transport arrangements to Mecca, Mina, Muzdalifah, Arafat and Medina during the pilgrimage. Separately, four subsidiary agreements were also signed between the Hajj Committee of India (HCI) and the Tawafa Organization for South Asian Pilgrims, the General Cars Syndicate, the United Agents Office and the National Guides Organization.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> '160,000 Indians for this Hajj', *Kuwait Samachar.com*, 1 April 2010  
[http://kuwait.samachar.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=39555%3A160000-indians-for-this-haj&Itemid=450](http://kuwait.samachar.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=39555%3A160000-indians-for-this-haj&Itemid=450)

<sup>2</sup> To understand the history related to the *Hajj Committee* in India, see  
<http://hajjcommittee.com/index.php?value=historyofhajj>

Under a law issued by the Saudi Arabian Government mandated international passport for endorsement of the Hajj visa from 2009.<sup>4</sup> Responding to this, a circular to all Regional Passport Offices from the Ministry of External Affairs, said: 'We will need to issue passports to all genuine Hajj applicants (those having the Hajj Committee's cover number and those travelling under the private operators' quota of 45,000) provided they furnish the necessary proof by August 13, 2010.' The circular further added that the passport offices would issue all regular passports on a priority basis where police verification report (PVR) had been received and in cases where PVR was not received up to 31 July; the restricted eight-month validity passport may be given.<sup>5</sup> This decision came after two meetings in New Delhi and Bangalore on 8 and 10 June, chaired by N Ravi, Secretary (East), Ministry of External Affairs.<sup>6</sup> Those who would like to make their Hajj passports a permanent one later would have to go through police verification, informed Mohd. Owais, the Chief Executive Officer of Hajj Committee of India.<sup>7</sup>

Meanwhile, in a reply to an RTI application filed by Mumbai-based activist Attar Azeemi on 22 June 2007, the national carrier had said: 'Air India does not have the capacity to operate Hajj flights. Therefore, aircraft are leased by AI for carriage of Hajj pilgrims.' It added, 'There is no benefit to the government of India (in giving) AI and Indian (Airlines) monopoly in operating Hajj flights. Allowing private airlines to operate Hajj flights may result in reduction in fares and reduction in burden of subsidy on the government.' Since 1993 (except 1997), due to the heavy volume of passengers going on Hajj, Air India had started wet-leasing aircraft from other carriers.<sup>8</sup> This year, for the first time, Air India is only the nodal agency for flights. Three Saudi airlines, including Saudi Arabian Airlines and NAS Air, have been selected by a process of 'competitive bidding'. A top Air India official stated, 'While Air India will be the nodal agency for the over 100,000 Indian Hajj pilgrims expected to fly to Mecca, due to capacity constraints we are not likely to fly ourselves at all. We will coordinate and do whatever else is required, but

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<sup>3</sup> K S Ramkumar, '160,00 Indians for this Hajj', *Arab News.com*, 1 April 2010, <http://arabnews.com/saudiarabia/article37686.ece>

<sup>4</sup> 'International Passport must for Hajj Pilgrim', *Sify News*, 22 January 2010 <http://sify.com/news/international-passport-must-for-haj-pilgrimage-news-national-kbwsEUBigcg.html>

<sup>5</sup> 'Hajj Pilgrims issued Passport with eight month validity', TNN, *The Times of India*, 4 August 2010 <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/chennai/Haj-pilgrims-issued-passports-with-eight-month-validity/articleshow/6253904.cms>

<sup>6</sup> 'Last Date for submission of Hajj Passports extended', Lucknow (PTI), *News4u*, 30 June 2010 <http://news4u.co.in/?tag=haj>

<sup>7</sup> 'Hajj Passport will be issued without police verification', *The India Post*, 30 June 2009 <http://www.theindiapost.com/headline/haj-passports-will-be-issued-without-police-verification-govt/>

<sup>8</sup> Shauvik Ghosh, 'Hajj subsidy has Air India fuming', *The Financial Express*, 13 September 2008 <http://www.financialexpress.com/news/haj-subsidy-has-air-india-fuming/360651/0>

we won't run the service ourselves.'<sup>9</sup> This year, Air India did make an attempt, but was out-bided by the three Saudi Arabian airlines.

The Hajj subsidy is an airfare subsidy given to Indian Muslim Hajj pilgrims by the Government of India. Pilgrims applying through the HCI are offered the concessionary fare. Related to the issue of Air India enjoying the monopoly over Hajj pilgrimage, competitive bidding is seen to substantially reduce the Hajj subsidy. The issue of subsidy has been a sore point over the years: Muslim religious leaders have described it as 'un-Islamic' and not a subsidy at all, while others have decried the 'undue largesse' offered to the 'pampered minority'.<sup>10</sup> 'There is no demand for the subsidy. The Haj becomes necessary only if you can afford it - physically as well as financially. If the government wants to end it (the subsidy), I will more than welcome that,' stated Maulana Abdul Hamid Nomani, spokesperson of the Jamiat Ulema-e-Hind.<sup>11</sup> The Government of India subsidises the airfare, which has been rising, pushing up the subsidy bill from Rs 3.67 billion in 2006 to Rs 3.90 billion in 2007 and to Rs 8.26 billion in 2008. Bodies like the Muslim Personal Law Board, Jamiat Ulama-e-Hind to Milli Council and other influential Muslim lobbies feel that the subsidy is not required and the money should be diverted to schools and education of the poor. But at the same time, many remained dissatisfied and feel the Government should keep its distance from such sensitive issues.<sup>12</sup> From next year, however, the government will start phasing out the subsidy it doles out on Hajj pilgrimage, from better-off Hajjis to cross-subsidise the travel cost for the less well-off Hajjis. The entire operation would be handed out to the Central Hajj Committee, which will work out the operational details of the cross-subsidisation model in phasing out the subsidy on airfare, before any final modification to the Hajj Committee Act 2002.<sup>13</sup>

This year, India witnessed an additional quota demand for 25,000, while the Saudi Government following such requests agreed to increase the quota by only 10 000. Many feared that the additional quota may not eventually reach the citizens.<sup>14</sup> In the case of Jammu and Kashmir, the

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<sup>9</sup> Seema Chishti, 'No AI flights for Hajj this year, Saudi Carriers win bid battle', *Indian Express*, 6 September 2010 <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/no-ai-flights-for-hajj-this-year-saudi-carriers-win-bids-battle/677728/>

<sup>10</sup> Jayanth Jacob, 'Government wants to end rising Hajj subsidy', *Hindustan Times*, 10 April 2010 <http://www.hindustantimes.com/Government-wants-to-end-rising-Haj-subsidy/Article1-529422.aspx>

<sup>11</sup> 'Good if Govt. quashes Hajj subsidy, IANS, *Zee News*, 10 April 2010, <http://www.zeenews.com/news617986.html>

<sup>12</sup> Zia Haq, 'Muslim leaders back cutting Hajj Subsidy', *Hindustan Times*, 11 April 2010 <http://www.hindustantimes.com/Muslim-leaders-back-cutting-Haj-subsidy/Article1-529806.aspx>

<sup>13</sup> Amitav Ranjan, 'Hajj Subsidy cuts start soon', *The Indian Express*, 13 October 2010 <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/haj-subsidy-cuts-start-soon/696844/>

<sup>14</sup> 'Hajj 2010: India gets additional quota of 10K', Staff Reporter, *Ummid.com*, 24 August 2010 [http://www.ummid.com/news/2010/August/24.08.2010/india\\_gets\\_additional\\_haj\\_quota.htm](http://www.ummid.com/news/2010/August/24.08.2010/india_gets_additional_haj_quota.htm)

only state with Muslim majority population, 7,644 seats were allotted last year including the additional quota by the All India Hajj Committee, while this year only 5,661 seats were allotted against 22,785 applications with no additional quota. Sources said, 'This is quite surprising and perhaps happened for the first time that instead of increasing the seats to J&K, which is the only Muslim majority state in India, they have been decreased this year'.<sup>15</sup> The External Affairs Minister S. M. Krishna had stated in the *Lok Sabha* that any increase in the Hajj quota of individual States would depend on the results of the ongoing census. He said the quota of states is now allotted on the basis of percentage of the Muslim population as in the 2001 census.<sup>16</sup> The Hajjis from Jammu and Kashmir demanded direct flight to Jeddah, as the Hajjis who are above the age of 60 were inconvenienced on account of a change of flight at Delhi or any other station. While previously direct flight had operated from Srinagar, the Saudi Arabia Airlines expressed their concern over the security in the valley thereby this measure.<sup>17</sup>

Also, nearly 7,000 pilgrims who performed Hajj could not get the 'Green' category of accommodation during their stay in Mecca this time. The cause was attributed to the delay on the part of the authorities in booking the required accommodation facility. Also, the resignation of the Minister of State for External Affairs Shashi Tharoor and a stay by the Delhi High Court on the appointment of the Central Hajj Committee chairman at a crucial time were seen as contributing factor.<sup>18</sup> In an embarrassing incident, Minister of State for Minorities' Welfare Mohammad Ahmadullah was stopped by the Saudi authorities for questioning just before he was to board a flight to Hyderabad, along with his wife and two sons. He had used his Hajj visa to perform *Umrah* with his family members in a direct violation of Saudi Law. The Union Ministry of External Affairs had to contact the Saudi Hajj ministry to avoid his detention.<sup>19</sup>

In Gujarat, the women were issued visas by the Saudi consulate to perform Hajj whereas the *Muharrams* (their male companions) were not issued the visa. It is imperative for the women to be accompanied by a father, brother, husband, son or any other male she is forbidden to marry. Hence, hundreds missed the Hajj this year from the state, causing complaints.<sup>20</sup> Apart from such

<sup>15</sup> 'JK awaits additional Hajj Quota', *Greater Kashmir*, 2 September 2010

<http://www.greaterkashmir.com/news/2010/Sep/2/jk-awaits-additional-hajj-quota-38.asp>

<sup>16</sup> 'Increase in Hajj Quota will depend on ongoing census; Krishna', PTI, *The Hindu*, 25 August 2010,

<http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/article593985.ece>

<sup>17</sup> 'Hajj pilgrims from JK demand direct flight to Jeddah', Agence India Press, 23 November 2010,

<http://agenceindiapress.com/kashmir-news/2389-hajj-pilgrims-from-jk-demand-direct-flight-to-jeddah-.html>

<sup>18</sup> Jabir Mushthari, 'Thousands of Hajj Pilgrims to miss Green Category accommodation', *The Hindu*, 28 October 2010, <http://www.thehindu.com/news/states/kerala/article855265.ece>

<sup>19</sup> 'Minister Ahmedullah stopped at Jeddah', *Deccan Chronicle*, 22 October 2010

<http://www.deccanchronicle.com/hyderabad/minister-ahmedullah-stopped-jeddah-423>

hassles, many Hajjis complained of a general mismanagement on the part of the authorities. In Lucknow, the pilgrims expressed anger over poor water supply and lack of eating joints at the State Hajj House.<sup>21</sup> In Hyderabad, there were acute shortages of accommodation, to the inconvenience of many.<sup>22</sup>

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***Sonia Roy is a research student at Jawaharlal Nehru University and can be reached at: [soniaroy03@gmail.com](mailto:soniaroy03@gmail.com)***

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<sup>20</sup> ‘Hundreds from Gujarat likely to miss Hajj’, Express News Service, *The Indian Express*, 5 November 2010  
<http://www.indianexpress.com/news/hundreds-from-gujarat-likely-to-miss-haj/707242/>

<sup>21</sup> ‘Pilgrims angry over poor facilities at State Hajj House’, *The Times Of India*, 12 October 2010  
<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/lucknow/Pilgrims-angry-over-poor-facilities-at-State-Hajj-House/articleshow/6732594.cms>

<sup>22</sup> ‘Chaos reigns at Hajj House’, *The Hindu*, 26 October 2010,  
<http://www.hindu.com/2010/10/26/stories/2010102661820300.htm>