Over 1,500 set for Mecca pilgrimage

KAMPALA

By Farooq Kasule

More than 1,500 muslims have been cleared for this year's pilgrimage to Mecca for Hajj by the Royal Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. They include 150 that have been sponsored by the State House, thanks to President Yoweri Museveni for the initiative.

The intending pilgrims were charged sh20m and above for the holy journey to Mecca, depending on the desired accommodations.

Sheikh Zakariyah Kyewalyanga, the chairperson of the Uganda Bureau of Hajj Affairs (UBHA), made the revelation during the mega send-off ceremony for the intending pilgrims at Wandegeya mosque on Friday.

"We are glad that 1,546 Ugandan muslims have been fully cleared for this year's Hajj. We therefore thank the Government for not only upholding the freedom of worship but also supporting us," Kyewalyanga said.

Hajj is the fifth pillar of the Islamic faith and every Muslim is encouraged to perform it at least once in their lifetime because of its enormous spiritual benefits.

Hajj rituals close with the celebration of Eid adhuha also known as the festival of sacrifice, which is expected to fall on May 27.

CLEARED PILGRIMS

Presiding over the send-off ceremony, Prince Kassim Nakibinge Kakungulu, the titular head of the muslim community in the country, commended UBHA for streamlining the pilgrimage process and ensuring that all cleared pilgrims meet Saudi Arabian travel requirements before departure.

He also thanked the bureau for restoring order, unity and credibility in Uganda's Hajj management, ending years of confusion that had previously marred the sacred journey.

"Before the bureau came on board, we used to face many challenges during Hajj preparations, but now there is order. I urge you to keep it up," Nakibinge noted.

PHOTO BY FAROOQ KASULE



Nakibinge (centre), Supreme Mufti Muhammad Shaban Galabuzi (second-right), Kyewalyanga with other guests during the send-off for pilgrims at Wandegeya Mosque

Nakibinge also thanked the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for formally recognising the bureau as the authorised body responsible for co-ordinating Haj travel for Ugandans.

Nakibinge warned the intending pilgrims against dealing with unauthorised agents to avoid being cheated.

Kyewalyanga said visa issuance officially closed with no additional opportunities available after the deadline.

Out of 82 registered Haj organisations, only 62 fulfilled the strict requirements set by Saudi authorities and Ugandan regulators.

SENSITISATION

Saudi Arabia has since appointed Kyewalyanga as Uganda's minister for Haji, further strengthening the bureau's co-ordination role.

Sheikh Hamidu Nsubuga, the UBHA spokesperson, said all pilgrims have been sensitised through their respective organisations and now possess mandatory travel documents, including passports, visas and yellow fever vaccination cards.

Sheikh Hussein Mutyaba, who heads visa issues, revealed that five of the intending pilgrims died before fulfilling their dream.

Sheikh Abdallah Twawil Baligeya, the director of Quba Hajj and Umrah Services, explained that muslims make pilgrimage to Mecca to trace the footsteps of Prophet Muhammad and retrace the journey of Prophet Ibrahim to earn extraordinary rewards from God.

Baligeya argues that muslims do not worship the Kaaba, a cube-shaped structure covered in a black and gold-embroidered cloth, but view it as their most sacred place and a powerful symbol of unity and monotheism. The first Hajj was performed in 632 by the Prophet Muhammad, re- establishing the traditions started by the Prophet Ibrahim.

Sheikh Abdullah Ssekimwanyi is said to be the first Ugandan to make pilgrimage to Mecca around 1922.

Ssekimwanyi, together with Abubakari Kibali, a local chief, then set off on foot from Wandegeya mosque to Port Sudan across the Red Sea and eventually to Mecca in Saudi Arabia.

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