

## Corona leads to global crisis of religious tourism

A Monitor Report

Date: 01 August, 2021



Mecca: The largest pilgrimage in the Muslim world the Hajj took place from July 17 to 22 in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. However, due to the coronavirus pandemic, this year again, only a few thousands of pilgrims were allowed to participate in the holy ritual. This led to another definite loss of income for the first economy of the Gulf nation as the opportunity for religious tourism was hit hard by the pandemic.

For two consecutive years, the Saudi authorities have largely decreased the number of Muslims taking part in the Hajj, barely 60,000 pilgrims, all residents of Saudi Arabia, aged between 18 and 65, suffering from no chronic illness and, above all, properly vaccinated.

This is a far cry from the 2.5 million pilgrims who flocked the holy city of Mecca in 2019 from all across over the world to perform Hajj.

Prior to the pandemic, the Hajj brought in an average of USD 10-15 billion a year to Saudi, in addition to the USD 4-5 billion spent by eight million or so pilgrims during the Umrah - the small, non-compulsory pilgrimage that can be made throughout the year.

The plunge of religious tourism is equivalent to 7 per cent of Saudi GDP as it is the second-largest contribution to the Kingdom's economy, after oil.

The disaster in religious tourism is not only seen in Saudi but also worldwide.

In Africa, thousands of travel agencies specialising in religious tourism have found themselves out of business overnight leading to a global crisis of religious tourism.

Many of the major religious gatherings have been suspended, with the exception of the Kumbh Mela, the great Hindu pilgrimage that brought together up to 9 million pilgrims on the banks of the Ganges last April and over several weeks.

However, India is still paying a high price for such gatherings, with over 411,000 deaths to date following the spread of the Delta variant, which now accounts for the majority of new infections globally.

In Europe, destinations such as Lourdes in France, San-tiago de Com-postela in Spain and Fati-ma in Portugal recorded a drop in activity of 75 per cent on average last year.

With the drastic reduction in pilgrim numbers in these major pilgrimage sites, the entire local economy, starting with the hotel and restaurant industry, has been seriously hit.

With the suspension of the great pilgrimage, Lourdes, the second-largest hotel city in France after Paris, recorded an occupancy rate of barely 25 per cent of its establishments last year.

Some 2,500 seasonal workers in these sectors were left jobless due to the crisis. Countless shops have been closed down.

This year again, the scenario repeated, forcing the pilgrims to follow the celebrations on screens.