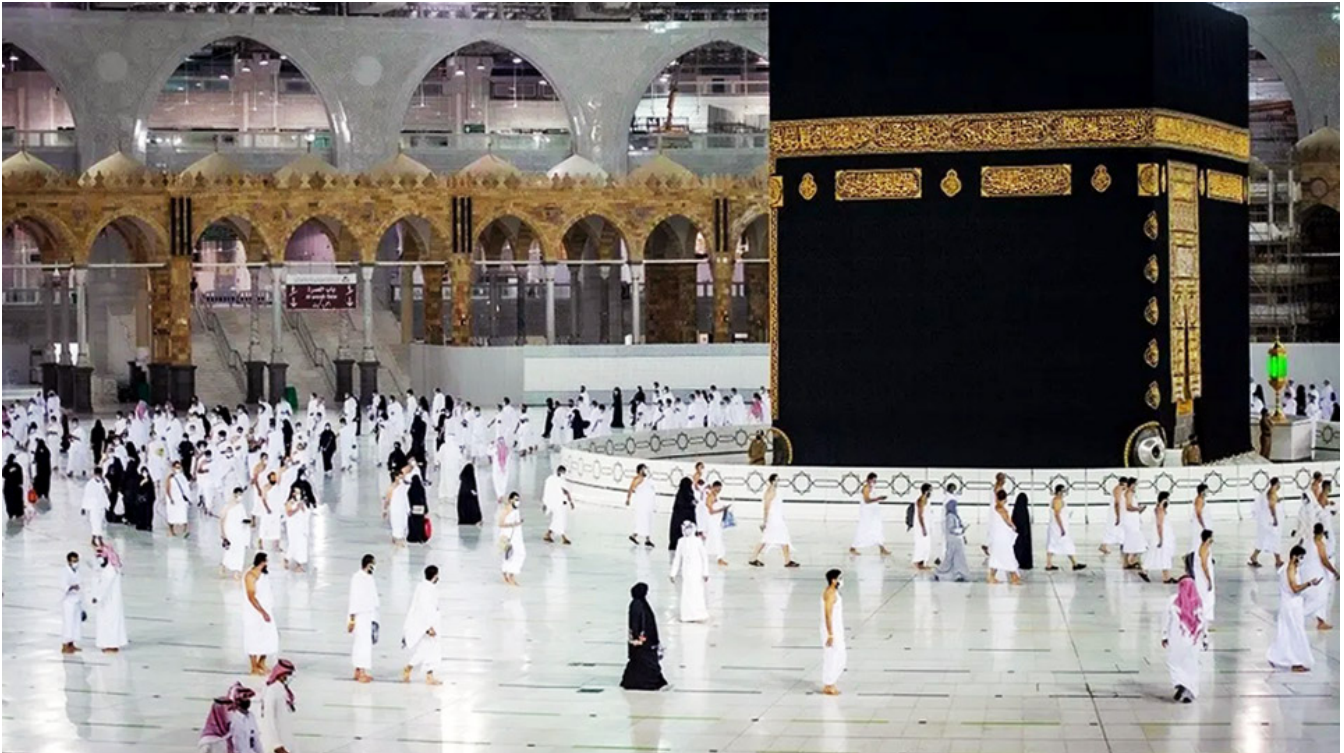


Australian, Western Muslims troubled by Saudi's new hajj pilgrimage lottery

- A Monitor Desk Report

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Dhaka: Muslims from Australia, New Zealand, the UK, North America, Europe, Canada and other western countries planning to perform Hajj this year are being forced to cancel their flights and hotel bookings over a new rule announced by the Saudi Arabian government on June 6 that puts the pilgrims in difficult positions.

The Saudi government made a surprise announcement, Muslims from Western countries were told to immediately cancel any existing flights and hotel bookings.

It said anyone who wanted to go this year needed to apply through a randomised lottery system on the newly launched Motawif website and they only had a four-day window to put in a bid.

This change of policy has shocked Muslim communities across the West and Oceania. It limits the number of places to one million, whereas earlier

Muslims from Western countries could claim their own places through travel agencies and Hajj tours.

Also, there are other restrictions on who is eligible to apply. Eligible candidates are those who are under 65, have up-to-date documentation, and are double-vaccinated against Covid-19.

People making the pilgrimage for the first time will be placed in priority queues.

Australia was allotted just over 2,000 spots for Hajj. The challenge is that you need to pay for your package within 48 hours or else you lose your spot.

In a statement, Saudi officials said the online lottery portal was introduced to crack down on Hajj-related scams run by fraudulent agents. There have been anecdotal reports of elderly Muslims being defrauded of thousands of dollars by thieves posing as Hajj tourism operators. But the ACCC said in a statement it was unable to provide any statistics on complaints relating to Hajj scams.

Numerous agents have made deposits from their own funds to secure spots in Saudi hotels and on flights with hopes to kick-start their businesses after a two-year crisis.

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