

Hajj Stories

Hajj without Arafat

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The day had to come that I would write a Hajj Story without being on Arafat that year. I always thought that one day I'll be too sick to travel to the hallowed grounds of Makkah and Madinah. It would mean a fragile body, battered and assaulted by the ravages of time and disease, would travel in spirit and soul but not physically. I always feared that I would not get a visa. Never ever would I deprive anyone who has not been on Hajj, of setting off for Arafat, by requesting their visa. Allah has smiled on me for the last twenty odd years. Some years I in fact managed to hastily rush home from work, greet those closest to me and then board the last permitted flight out of South Africa. I never doubted that I would be blessed to perform Hajj, all that was in doubt was the time, if any, I would be able to spend making additional Tawaafs and visiting Madinah. This year is so different. I have no doubt that I will not be going.

The COVID-19 pandemic has really been unprecedented in its unpredictability and speed of spread. It is often said that an organism that caused a disease in a remote location can spread

within twenty four hours across the globe. We know that half of the world's population fly every year, with more than one and a half billion crossing an international boundary. We of course

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know that it's not only the humans that travel as all of us carry a number of micro-organisms with us. Most are harmless and some may even be beneficial. Occasionally, such as swine influenza about a decade ago and COVID-19 currently, we have pandemics that violently reminds us that despite our perceived major advances in knowledge we really are in our infancy as far as understanding all of nature's wizardry is concerned. I am often asked as to how many of pandemics man has been able to predict. Bear in mind that we have state of the art resources such as genomic sequencing, predictive modelling and real time analyses to work with. The answer? Exactly zero.

Perhaps I am hiding behind the façade of being a scientist to

rationalise the pandemic's effects. But nothing could have prepared us for a force resembling an amoebic black hole that seems to be able to change shape, direction, intensity and effect at will. A number of experts initially thought it would be a mere cold like disease with no more than nuisance value in early January of 2020. We were still preparing pilgrims for Umrah and started recruiting accredited Hajj pilgrims for a fitness programme! So what if China, where the outbreak started, was shutting down a city of millions. The rest of the world seemed deaf to the soft waves of caution whispered by colleagues increasingly concerned by an enigmatic foe. The medical epicentre of the universe is unfortunately situated nowhere near there and blasély went about their life with gay abandon. It was peak holiday season and on any one day more than ten million humans were airborne traversing vast distances. They were unwittingly giving substance to the truism that the virus does not have wings and does not fly; it is humans that gives it feet.

We realised that something was seriously amiss when Italian colleagues reported mounting deaths caused by the virus. Col-

leagues in other countries soon followed and the world's attention was now firmly on the western modern countries. Health systems were overrun, new treatment regimes were frantically introduced and just as quickly discarded and changed. The only experts were self-proclaimed social media gurus who often confused good science with bizarre science fiction and conspiracy theories. It was only a matter of time for the virus to cross the oceans, to leap from continent to continent, then country to country and now even small-town suburbs. It insidiously assimilated first into clusters but now is everywhere. Ironically when calls were made for international travel to be halted in order to prevent the importation of the pathogen, nothing was done, but now that

it has shown not to respect boundaries and had shown that its spread was inevitable, flights were grounded. Flights to all parts of the world are grounded.

Our predicted timelines proved appallingly and haphazardly inaccurate. 'Don't worry, you'll

the hope that this eternal optimist can muster I cannot see the clouds currently drenching us in this cyclone parting in time to let the sun shine through. It is a surreal feeling, just as it is for my 80 year young Imam who would have leading a group for



No Hajj is complete without Arafat

be able to perform Umrah in March,' I told a group sometime in February. At the end of March we thought that pilgrims will be able to go during the month of Ramadan. At the end of Ramadan the world had to take stock and some countries decided not to send their citizens for Hajj. The Saudi authorities decided not to allow any foreign contingents onto the plains of Arafat. Their own citizens and foreigners who find themselves in Saudi Arabia may find themselves privileged to don their Ighrams. Hajj is fixed in place, time and sequence and can never be cancelled. Millions will have their planned journey postponed and some will never ever be able to set sight on the Kaba'a. I thought there would be time for the pandemic to run its course. Millions made Duaa that the measures put in place would inevitably contain the spread and that life would return to some semblance of normality.

Sadly, we are talking of a new normal and that unfortunately does not include boarding any international flight by the time the time of Wuqoof arrives. The happy intersection of borders opening and ascending Jabal Rahmah is now mere wishful thinking. Of course, miracles happen and I always knew my annual miracle of obtaining a visa sometimes in the nick of time would happen over the last two decades. But with even all

the fiftieth Hajj of his blessed existence. Many others who cannot fathom not shepherding Hujjaaj are already dreading each sunrise that is heralding another dusk to their hopes. Some are already planning a virtual Hajj. Others are planning local alternate programmes. Nothing can compare to the physical presence on Arafat at the time of Wuqoof.

I am often asked whether it saddens me that I would not be able to assist Hujjaaj this year. It is all the will of our Creator. What hurts the most is the disappointment I see in the eyes in those accredited pilgrims that I instilled hope in. Here I can only humbly ask for forgiveness. It was not based on an arrogant supposition of being all knowing. Rather it was based on my vast experience in travel medicine, in Hajj travel, in infectious disease and the travel industry. This has led me to erroneously believe that nothing can stop an invitation extended by Allah from being accepted. Allah's will has again emphasised mankind's vulnerability to our wily nature's wide repertoire of unexpected onslaughts. This has given rise to the new normal of appreciating what we have, of humbly accepting our vulnerability and when we finally in the future stand on Arafat we can truly say: 'Labaaik! I am here!'

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