

# HAJJ STORIES

## WHEN CALAMITY STRIKES

JULY 2024

Please stay out of the direct sunlight during the middle of the day during Hajj,' I pleaded and preached to all those who were gifted with an invitation to visit the Holy Lands. I have seen and treated countless pilgrims who suffered from heat injuries over more than two decades and was, and always am, wary of its potential catastrophic effects. I remind everyone of the 1985 disaster during Hajj when more than two thousand suffered from heat stroke with half of them being recalled by our Creator. We expand our advice to include staying well hydrated, limiting physical activities to a minimum, using umbrellas when necessity forces outdoor sojourns, and seeking immediate medical help if any symptoms are felt. We encourage pilgrims to be mindful of especially older companions as they may be on medication that may mask symptoms, and to inform the medical personnel if they observe anything unusual about them.

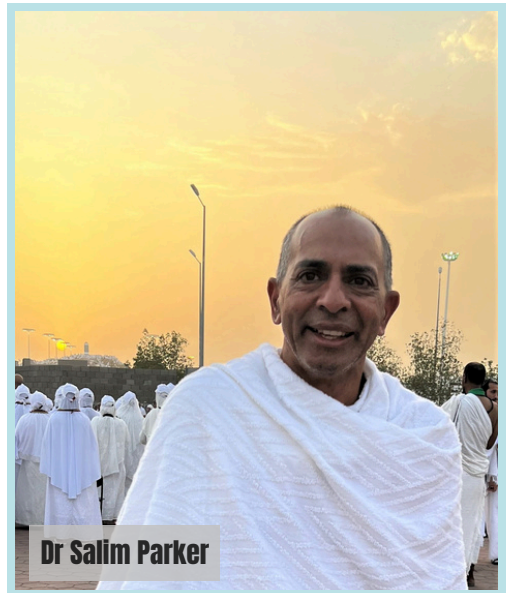
I have been impressed with the measures the Saudi authorities have implemented to prevent heat illnesses. Mist sprayers abound all over, from surrounding the Haram in Makkah to lining the walkways along the Hajj routes. Water stations are available everywhere, and during the days of Hajj all the attending personnel, whether volunteers, police, armed forces or labourers would assist pilgrims. They would hand out umbrellas and water, spray passing pilgrims with water, and advise them to stay in the shade. The medical facilities for the unfortunate few who somehow get exposed is really world-class, and for the last decade we had very few fatalities, despite Hajj being in the heart of summer. However, circumstances were very, very different this Hajj of 2024 and tragedy struck. It was a combination of a loophole used by many to be present in Makkah, unexpectedly high temperatures, and the fear of being deported that led to more than 1300 deaths due to heatstroke.

'I entered Saudi on a visitor visa a week before Hajj was due to start,' he said. 'They only recently imposed a ban on those without Hajj permits and I made up my mind to be here before that announcement. A taxi picked me up at Jeddah airport and had a clear plan worked out. I was dropped off just before the checkpoints along the road, directed where and how to walk in the desert and then to meet the driver once he passed the checkpoint. I walked for nearly two hours in the scorching sun and was completely drained thereafter. We arrived in Azizyah, a part of Makkah, and now I must make sure that the police do not ask for my documents otherwise they'll deport me,' he added. His anxiety was palpable, and every time he heard a siren or saw a policeman, he was visibly nervous.

### ***'Social media conveyed graphic footage of harrowing scenes of bodies sprawled beside roads.'***

He managed, like nearly half a million others, to evade the authorities. Since staying on Mina on the first day of Hajj is not compulsory, nearly all of those without Hajj permits stayed behind in Azizyah. It was a blazingly hot day and I felt blessed to be in my cooled tent with more than enough refreshing liquids. The next morning, the Day of Arafat, the most important day in the life of any Muslim, my group left Mina in our air-conditioned bus. He managed to get to Arafat on one of these buses but was initially left stranded in a road on Arafat where there was no shelter. He was lucky, as others without Hajj permits walked more than 15 kilometers to Arafat. They tried to avoid the major walking roads as the police and army were very visible and there was the fear of being arrested.

They took routes without shelter, without water and without assistance. The irony was that the authorities went out of their way to assist. Water and medical facilities were offered to anyone who asked for it. Official statistics showed that nearly a third of advanced medical care was given to unregistered pilgrims. We observed the unity of the Umah when, if anyone collapsed, a number of fellow pilgrims would render assistance. However, there were many on the outer roads who were not noticed, and many who were scared to seek help. The camps on Arafat, where the air conditioners were working very efficiently, were tightly guarded to only allow entry to specific pilgrim groups. The guards rationalized that the authorized pilgrims paid a fortune for the services, and it should not be hijacked. When we took water to some, evidently dehydrated, unregistered pilgrims sitting outside our camp, we were refused entry back in because the guard confused our camp numbers! Just those ten minutes outside drained us physically and it must have been absolute torture for those who endured hours of the furnace.



Dr Salim Parker

He was lucky as he was taken into a tent without any questions asked after nearly suffering from sunstroke. Some fellow pilgrims fed him, and he managed to find his way later that evening to Musdalifah on a bus. I met a few pilgrims who told me the harrowing story that they genuinely believed that they were accredited pilgrims and only realised that they were conned when they had to enter Makkah under a veil of secrecy. They were then abandoned by their agent and made their way to Arafat on their own, at an additional cost. Stories like that really gall me. They were however just relieved that they reached Arafat and that they would complete their Hajj. 'Unlike one thousand three hundred others who passed away due to the heat,' I thought. Yes, they passed away as martyrs, but as a doctor, I knew their deaths could have been avoided.

I saw more who suffered from heat illnesses this particular year than in the twenty previous years combined. We knew that we had a heatwave, and we knew that there were many unregistered pilgrims who had to walk. I did not see any of those who succumbed along the roads, but I did assist with some who were already suffering from heatstroke and who were being rushed off to hospital. I suspected at least two were not going to survive; Allah knows best. Social media conveyed graphic footage of harrowing scenes of bodies sprawled beside roads.

I met him in Azizyah after pelting the Jamarat on the third day of Hajj. He was physically, emotionally and spiritually drained. 'Hajj is also a physical journey,' I reflected. 'People should not die like what transpired,' I added melancholically. The Saudi authorities were in a difficult situation in that they had to limit the number of pilgrims to ensure safety as Hajj takes place in confined spaces with the mass movement of people along confined routes within specified timeframes. They will have to deny the majority of Muslims access to the Holy Lands for any specific year and somehow cater for those who managed to surreptitiously don Ihram for Arafat.

The next day we pelted the three Jamarats. By now many have either lost their proof of registration, or simply did not bother to carry it. I looked around after pelting the third and final effigy of Shaitan. No one knew who an unregistered pilgrim was. We were all in the final stages of completing our rituals and all made Duaa that Allah would accept our Hajj. ; Allahu a'alam;....Allah knows best.



Most, but not all had shade, air conditioned tents and adequate provisions on Arafat.