

Hajj Stories

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Crushed by the Inconceivable

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‘Do not be worried about stampedes at the Jamaraats,’ I said whilst addressing a group of Hujjaaj a few months before they were to depart for the 2015 Hajj. The Saudi government has vastly increased the pathways that the pilgrims walk along and the area for pelting has increased tremendously. Instead of only two levels for pelting there were now five and the flow of pilgrims is very strictly regulated. ‘We can only enter the Jamaraat area along one way and leave a completely different road so that traffic always flows in one direction only. Each country and camp is given a specific timeslot when they are permitted to pelt, and this reduces the chance of congestion even further,’ I added. I then expanded on the number of surveillance cameras that inform the authorities of any imminent problems and how the extraordinary measures they put in place to prevent such problems from eventuating as well of the roving helicopters that provides an expansive bird’s eye view of what’s happening on the ground. ‘It is very unlikely that something will wrong,’ I concluded. But I was proven to be wrong; very, very wrong.

The numbers of Hujjaaj were drastically reduced for that year due to construction in Makkah around the Haram. True, it was difficult to perform a Tawaaf or get close to the Kab’aa due to space restrictions but the number of pilgrims was definitely less. This should in theory make the other components of Hajj easier. The space and facilities on Mina and Arafat were better

commonly described. Even when a hotel caught fire necessitating the evacuation of more than a thousand residents it did not cause any bother amongst us. It was known that some groups illegally tried to light fires in their rooms in order to cook food even though regulations strictly forbade that activity.

The first day of Hajj on Mina passed uneventfully even though temperatures soared to very high levels. The next day we were all on Arafat. We all had our Hajj! No matter what happened now we would insha-Allah been closer to our Creator than ever before and would leave the vast plains cleansed of our sins and as innocent as new-born babies. That evening we set off for Musdalifah and again, with the blessings of fifteen previous journeys, the crowds were distinctly easier to navigate. After spending the evening at Musdalifah, my group set off just after midnight for Mina to pelt, whilst a very large number of Hujjaaj stayed till dawn the next morning. Our group then made our way to Makkah to finish our Tawaaf and Sa’ee. We were back in our hotel just after Fajr, before the dawn break, at about the same time as the masses still at Musdalifah prepared to move to Mina to pelt. We were exhausted and needed rest and peace. Some of those moving to Mina were walking towards permanently resting in peace.

I must have been asleep for about three hours when my phone rang, about two hours before midday. It was my

ringing the first time.’ She sounded immensely relieved. ‘I was worried about the stampede,’ she said. ‘Oh, I hear that every year,’ I replied. ‘No Daddy, it is all over the news and live images are being shown on television and social media,’ she said. I immediately called some of my fellow Hujjaaj on Mina. They were safe and sound and were not aware of any calamity. I also called a member of the South African Hajj Mission who had close contact with the authorities. He also did not hear of anything. I went downstairs and saw people congregating around a television. I knew I had to get to Mina immediately.

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All my preconceived ideas that no stampede could occur were shattered. Human nature and an inability to act in a situation where the crowd was clearly getting restless and irritable in the oppressively hot and humid conditions, all contrived to the inconceivable happening. I tried to get to area where the tragedy occurred but security personnel had cordoned it off and only certain officials could enter the area. But we could see martyrs laid down in rows. The temperature was close to fifty degrees and we sincerely hoped that those injured in the crushing stampede and still alive would be moved immediately to a cooler area. The medics were frantically attempting to separate those who have passed away from those whose lives could still be saved. There can be no more agonising experience than being immobile due to injuries whilst the merciless sun burns and dehydrates every drop of moisture from the battered body.

I returned to our camp and attended to two men who were caught up in the stampede with their spouses. They told of first seeing to the welfare of their spouses and once their safety was assured, tried to help wherever they could. One recounted of trying to hold the hand of an injured and trying to assist him out under a pile of bodies. He felt the grip get weaker and weaker and then simply dropped down onto an already crushed body. He knew that life was no more.

‘Martyrs,’ it was said. ‘They are so lucky to leave this world in a state of Ihram, completely cleansed of sins. Surely their place can only be the highest place in heaven.’ Of course they are assured Jannah. I looked around my tent. I saw relieved faces. Faces that said that they want to go home as innocent as children. Faces that said that they want to have a second chance in life and live it to the fullest as their Creator prescribed. I did not see any face that wished for death but instead saw the relief that and the blessing that we were very much alive. Allah wa A’lam....Allah knows best.

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The Jamaraat area has been the site for many stampedes.

than previous years and with at least a million less Hujjaaj that year no problems were anticipated. The only area of concern was around the Kaba’a itself for the obligatory Tawaaf and Sa’ee due to the construction. When a crane collapsed in the Haram area killing over a hundred people it did not cause any alarm. ‘A freak wind, an act of God’ was how it was

daughter calling from home. ‘Is Daddy ok?’ she asked. She said that it was the second time that she was calling and was worried that I did not answer the first time. She was very aware of my phone always being with me! It should have struck me that she did not ask about my Hajj. ‘I am fine,’ I reassured her, ‘I was probably in a deep sleep and did not hear the phone