

Pilgrims from the West flock to hajj



AFP | Mecca, Saudi Arabia



Despite the Middle East war and a US government travel advisory, there was never any doubt in Fadel's mind that he would attend this year's hajj pilgrimage in Saudi Arabia.

"Even if the war were still ongoing, I would not have backed out," the 49-year-old US national, who asked that only his first name be used, told AFP.

"We are undoubtedly in the safest place in the world," he added, referring to a passage from the Koran.

This sentiment is common among many Muslims from

Western nations who have come to Saudi Arabia for the upcoming hajj in the wake of the devastating war in the Middle East.

This year's rites, drawing Muslim worshippers from across the world, follow waves of Iranian strikes on targets in Saudi Arabia and its Gulf neighbours after the United States and Israel attacked the Islamic republic in late February.

Amid the uncertainty, the American embassy in Riyadh last month advised US citizens not to participate in the hajj.

"Due to the ongoing security situation and intermittent travel disruptions, we advise reconsid-

ering participation in Hajj this year," a statement released by the embassy read.

The US State Department told AFP its diplomatic missions in Saudi Arabia remain open with "adjusted staffing levels" and were "ready to support Americans who require assistance".

On Friday, US media reported the White House was weighing the launch of new military strikes on Iran, with any new fighting likely to have a direct impact on the hajj, according to experts.

"If the conflict breaks out again, there is a strong possibility of real disruptions to pilgrim

travel," said Umer Karim, an expert on Saudi Arabia at the University of Birmingham in Britain.

"They could find themselves stranded, which could create additional logistical and hosting challenges."

'Very anxious'

But for many, the chance to perform the sacrosanct Muslim rite has taken precedence over the fears of instability caused by the war.

Sayed, a 47-year-old Australian who will attend the hajj for the seventh time, said there were no "second thoughts about coming here", even as his own govern-

ment issued an advisory urging citizens to reconsider travel to the region.

"When you make the intention to come, you come with a reason and a purpose. And that's why you're here and put your faith in God that everything will be fine," he told AFP while standing outside Mecca's Grand Mosque dressed in white garments.

As more than a million pilgrims poured into the holy city ahead of the hajj, the breadth and diversity of the global Islamic community was on vivid display, with many carrying paraphernalia such as bags and umbrellas showing their country of origin.

"This is an opportunity that comes once in a life and I decided not to miss it," said Ibrahim Diab, a 63-year-old German national, despite the "shaky situation in the Gulf".

But even amid the euphoric atmosphere in Mecca ahead of the hajj, some pilgrims said fears about the war had troubled them ahead of the journey.

"I was very anxious about it," 36-year-old British accountant Imad Ahmad told AFP.

But he also said there was no doubt that he would continue on his journey to Mecca.

"I will come, whichever way I can, inshallah," he added.

Trump says Iran deal 'opposite' of Obama nuclear pact

● Defends Iran talks, says no rush for final deal

● Vows tougher Iran deal as Hormuz blockade stays

● Says time on US side in Iran negotiations

● Hints Iran could join Abraham Accords

● Hormuz blockade to continue until Iran deal signed: Trump

Agencies

President Donald Trump yesterday defended the ongoing negotiations with Iran, describing the proposed agreement as the "exact opposite" of the Obama-era nuclear deal, which he called one of the "worst deals ever made" by the United States.

Trump said the earlier agreement had created "a direct path to Iran developing a Nuclear Weapon", while insisting the current negotiations were aimed at preventing Tehran from obtaining a nuclear bomb.

"The negotiations are proceeding in an orderly and constructive manner," Trump wrote on social media, adding that he had instructed US negotiators not to rush the process because "time is on our side".

He also said the blockade of the Strait of Hormuz would remain in place until a final

agreement was "reached, certified, and signed".

"Both sides must take their time and get it right. There can be no mistakes," Trump wrote, adding that Iran "cannot develop or procure a Nuclear Weapon or Bomb".

The proposed framework reportedly includes a 60-day ceasefire period during which negotiations on Iran's nuclear programme would continue. Critics of the emerging arrangement argue that it does not immediately restrict Iran's nuclear activities and allows nuclear material to remain inside the country during the talks. Trump also thanked Middle Eastern countries for supporting efforts to reach an agreement and suggested Iran could eventually join the Abraham Accords, under which several Arab nations established ties with Israel.

"I would like to thank, thus far, all of the countries of the Middle East for their support and cooperation," Trump wrote. "Who knows, perhaps the Islamic Republic of Iran would like to join, as well."

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TRUMP

Trump says US will not 'rush into a deal' with Iran

No more nuke fear

US-Iran framework delays key nuclear dispute

Agencies

The emerging US-Iran framework centres on preventing fears of an Iranian nuclear weapon while postponing the toughest disputes over Tehran's nuclear programme for later negotiations.

US Secretary of State Marco Rubio said the process could eventually create "a world that no longer has to fear or worry about an Iranian nuclear weapon", after President Donald Trump said an agreement had been "largely negotiated".

Iranian officials confirmed the existence of a draft understanding, but stressed that negotia-



tions over uranium enrichment and other contentious nuclear issues would be deferred for 60 days after any agreement takes effect. Tehran has long rejected US demands for a complete halt to enrichment activities.

According to Iran's Fars news agency, Washington has agreed to release part of Tehran's frozen overseas funds and temporarily ease sanctions on oil, gas and petrochemical exports during the negotiation period.

The diplomatic push follows a ceasefire observed since April 8 after weeks of conflict involving the United States,

Iran and Israel. Iranian hardline newspaper Javan described the situation as "one step away from ending hostilities, and one step away from war".

Regional leaders from Saudi Arabia,

United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Egypt, Jordan and Bahrain joined talks with Trump on Saturday as diplomatic efforts intensified.

Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif said Islamabad hoped to host another round of negotiations soon to help secure "lasting peace in the region".

Trump told Netanyahu will insist final Iran deal ends nuclear programme: Israeli official

AFP | Jerusalem, Undefined

US President Donald Trump has assured Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that he will hold firm on his demand for the dismantling of Iran's nuclear programme, as a condition in any final agreement with Tehran, a senior Israeli official told AFP.

"President Trump made clear that he will remain steadfast in the ne-

gotiations regarding his longstanding demand for the dismantlement of Iran's nuclear programme and the removal of all enriched uranium from Iranian territory, and that he will not sign a final agreement absent these conditions," the official said, referring to a conversation between the two leaders on Saturday night.

