

# Haj:



The Foreign Secretary Mr. Jack Straw

وزير الخارجية البريطاني جاك سترو

## The most sacred journey on earth

London - Manal Ameer

Every year millions of Muslims from all around the world head to Mecca to perform the largest ritual of faith known to mankind; Haj, the most sacred trip on earth. The first Haj was performed in the 9th year of hijra.

### British Muslims and Haj

The preparations for Haj start weeks before the Haj month. Preachers lecture at mosques, especially to Friday congregations. They try to raise awareness about the great reward of Haj and encourage Muslims to perform this pillar of Islam.

Approximately 20,000 British Muslims travel to Mecca every year to perform Haj, both immigrants and Muslims of British origin. They consider this journey to the holy city and the performance of these rituals as religious obligations. Although the majority of travellers are old people, many young people also perform Haj. The Foreign Office, with the corporation of the Muslim Council of Britain and the Association of British Hujjaj, send a delegation with the pilgrims to Saudi Arabia. It is the official body that helps pilgrims throughout the Haj. The delegation consists of a group of volunteers, including doctors and counsellors. Their aim is raise awareness of all the difficulties which the pilgrims might

encounter during their trip, such as the heat of the sun, since Haj is performed in the desert of Mecca. Dehydration is another common problem, as is exhaustion, food problems and respiratory bronchial problems. The British government takes a great interest in the pilgrimage of its citizens and the Foreign Office funds part of the delegates (doctors and counsellors) accommodation and travel costs, and pays all the costs of the FCO's Consular staff who travel with the delegation, and the Haj Advisory Group Secretariat based in London. The Muslim Member of British House of Lords, Adam Patel, will head the delegation this year. They will leave to Mecca on 21st of January 2005. The delegation will be accompanied by people from the British general consulate in Jeddah.

### Life after Haj

British Muslims who return from pilgrimage celebrate their safe return and the

accomplishment of Haj with their friends and families. Some Muslim cultures call any person who performs this duty a "Haaji" (pilgrim) for the rest of his life, in recognition of the great ritual which he has performed.

Haj is a life changing journey. The relation which pilgrims make with Allah changes their lives afterwards. This alteration is reflected in their daily life after Haj. They become very keen to avoid sins and evil deeds.

There are hundreds of travel agencies scattered all around the globe who organise this event with the coordination of the Ministry of Haj in Saudi Arabia in an attempt to provide a better and safer pilgrimage. In the UK there are about 80 agents that offer different packages tailored to all requirements.

If you travel to Haj, you need a visa. The Saudi embassy in London starts issuing Haj visas from the first week of December until mid January. You also need several vaccinations. ■