

More than 1.5 million foreign pilgrims arrive in Makkah for Hajj

Muslim worshippers pray around the Kaaba at the Grand Mosque in Makkah, Saudi Arabia on Tuesday. AFP Muslim pilgrims have been streaming into Saudi Arabia's holy city of Makkah ahead of the start of the Hajj later this week, as the annual pilgrimage returns to its monumental scale. Saudi officials say more than 1.5 million foreign pilgrims have arrived in the country by Tuesday, the vast majority by air, from across the world. More are expected, and hundreds of thousands of Saudis and others living in Saudi Arabia will also join them when the pilgrimage officially begins on Friday. Saudi Government agencies in Madinah are intensifying efforts as the 5th of the month of Dhu Al-Hijjah (Tuesday, 11th June) is the peak day for transferring remaining pilgrims from Madinah to Makkah by bus round the clock, through the designated stations and the Mosque of Miqat Dhu Al-Hulayfah, Saudi Press Agency (SPA) reported on Tuesday. Today, Hijra Road in Madinah will witness much movement as pilgrims will be transported to Makkah, supported by security and health services to ensure organised transportation. General Syndicate of Cars Madinah branch Director Mazen Tharwat told the SPA that the syndicate mobilised all cadres and vehicles to prepare the buses

transporting pilgrims to the holy sites. He added that field teams and mobile maintenance workshops are in place along the Hijra Road linking Madinah and Makkah, and that support centres supervise the flow of pilgrim bus movement to Makkah. Muslim worshippers walk at the Grand Mosque in Saudi Arabia's holy city of Makkah on Tuesday. AFP Tharwat further said that more than 1,700 buses were ready to leave Madinah for Makkah, having been inspected by a specialised technical team to ensure that pilgrims enjoy a comfortable ride.

Ban on unauthorised vehicles

Meanwhile, the Saudi Public Security has announced that unauthorised vehicles will be denied entry to Holy Sites during Hajj, effective from midnight on the fifth of Dhu Al-Hijjah until the end of the 13th day. According to the Public Security, individuals transporting pilgrims without valid Hajj permits will face imprisonment for up to six months and a fine of up to SAR50,000 for each unauthorised pilgrim transported. Once the case is referred to court that may rule confiscation of the vehicle used and deportation of the transporter (if a resident) with a subsequent entry ban for a period determined by the system. Pilgrims without valid Hajj permits will be fined SAR10,000. For residents, this

will be followed by deportation and a temporary entry ban as outlined by the system. The Public Security emphasised the importance of adhering to Hajj regulations and instructions to ensure a secure, safe, and comfortable environment for all pilgrims. Saudi officials have said they expect the number of pilgrims this year to exceed 2023, when more than 1.8 million people performed Hajj, approaching pre-pandemic levels. In 2019, more than 2.4 million Muslims made the pilgrimage. Pilgrims hold umbrellas while walking ahead of the annual Hajj pilgrimage. AFP On Tuesday, pilgrims thronged the Grand Mosque in Makkah, performing a ritual circuit walking seven times around the Kaaba, the cube-shaped structure inside the mosque that is considered Islam's holiest site. They wore ihrams, two unstitched sheets of white cloth that resemble a shroud. Many were seen carrying umbrellas against the sun, in temperatures reaching 42 degrees Celsius (107 Fahrenheit) during the day on Tuesday. "I was relieved when I arrived at the Al-Masjid Al-Haram and saw the Kaaba," said Rabeia al-Raghi, a Moroccan woman who came to Makkah for Hajj along with her husband and their daughter. "I am very happy." At night, the vast marble court around the Kaaba was packed with



the faithful, walking nearly shoulder to shoulder and often jostling with barricades set up by security forces to direct the giant flows of people in and around the Grand Mosque. Pilgrims do the circumambulation, known as "Tawaf" in Arabic, upon arriving in Makkah. The large crowds circling the Kaaba will last into the Hajj's first day. Muslim pilgrims arrive to Saudi Arabia's holy city of Makkah on Tuesday ahead of the annual Hajj pilgrimage. AFP On Friday, pilgrims will move to the Mountain of Ararat for a daylong vigil, then to Muzdalifah, a rocky plain area a few miles away. In Muzdalifah, pilgrims collect pebbles to be used in the symbolic stoning of pillars representing the devil back in Mina. One of the world's largest religious gatherings, the Hajj is one of the Five Pillars of Islam. All Muslims are required to undertake it at least once in their lives if they are physically and financially able to do so. Those in the Hajj view the pilgrimage as an opportunity to strengthen their faith, wipe out old sins and start new.

WHO confirms human case of bird flu in India, 2nd case since 2019



The World Health Organization on Tuesday said a case of human infection with bird flu caused by the H9N2 virus was detected in a four-year-old child in the eastern Indian state of West Bengal. The patient was admitted to the pediatric intensive care unit (ICU) of a local hospital due to persistent severe respiratory issues, high fever and abdominal cramps in February, and was discharged three months later after diagnosis and treatment, the WHO said. The patient had exposure to poultry at home and in his surroundings, and there were no known person reporting symptoms of respiratory illness among his family and other contacts, the agency said. Information on the vaccination status and details of antiviral treatment were not available at the time of reporting, the WHO added. This is the second human infection of H9N2 bird flu from India, with the first in 2019, the agency said. While the H9N2 virus typically tends to cause

The World Health Organization (WHO) has confirmed that a four-year-old child in West Bengal, India, has been infected with the H9N2 bird flu virus. The child was admitted to a local hospital's pediatric intensive care unit in February, suffering from severe respiratory issues, high fever, and abdominal cramps. After receiving the diagnosis and treatment, the child was discharged three months later. The WHO reported that the child had been exposed to poultry at home and in the surrounding area. No other family members or contacts have reported respiratory symptoms. Details on the child's vaccination status and antiviral treatment were not available at the time of reporting. This case marks the second instance of human infection with the H9N2 strain of bird flu in India, following the first reported case in 2019. While H9N2 typically causes mild illness, the WHO warned that sporadic human cases may continue to occur, given the virus's prevalence in poultry across various regions.

Narendra Modi pulls off cabinet trick, corners allies

In taunting the NDA coalition partners that they had been handed a "jhunjhuna" (baby's rattle) in government formation, the Opposition may have unwittingly paid tribute to Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Widely perceived as being at the mercy of allies after losing his majority in the Lok Sabha - the BJP fell short by over 30 seats - Modi has given away precious little to major allies like Chandrababu Naidu and Nitish Kumar. They've got lean bits of flesh, not the proverbial pound. The distribution of portfolios on Monday saw Modi managing to pull off the game on his terms. The BJP not only retained all the top four ministries of home, finance, defence and foreign affairs but also cornered most other key portfolios of education, railways, health, road transport and highways, commerce and industries, agriculture, rural development, urban affairs, petroleum and natural gas, which it had held in the previous government. In the UPA 1 government too, the Congress with just 145 seats had managed to keep all the top 4 ministries with itself and repeated the same in UPA 2, when the Congress had won over 200 seats, far less than the BJP's current tally of 240. But unlike the Congress during UPA, this is the first time the aggressive Modi will be tested on how he manages coalition dharma. Shiv Sena (Uddhav Thackeray) leader Sanjay Raut on Tuesday said that there were two "atrupta aatmas" (dissatisfied souls) in the NDA government, Naidu and Nitish, indicating that they will rock the Modi 3.0 government in the days to come. Leaders attached to the Naidu-Nitish groups on the contrary, appeared pleased with the "jhunjhuna" (as AAP leader Sanjay Singh said) they had been offered. The TDP, with the largest contingent of 16 MPs after the BJP in the NDA, was expected to get some four portfolios but looked gleeful with just one cabinet rank and one junior minister.



Three-term MP of the party Ram Mohan Naidu was allotted the civil aviation portfolio, which the party held in the first Modi government. "I am super excited to get the civil aviation ministry that has a lot of scope and potential... We (TDP) have extended unconditional support to the NDA and so there is no question of any misgiving," Naidu, one of the youngest ministers in the Cabinet, told reporters today. Lalan Singh of the JDU, the second largest BJP partner after the TDP, happily took charge of the ministries of fisheries, animal husbandry and dairying and panchayati raj on Tuesday. Besides this cabinet rank, the JDU has been allotted a junior minister's slot as well. "This is your viewpoint," Singh replied when asked that the allies have been given "insignificant" departments. "Kaam na koi chhota hota hai na bada. Kaam kaam hota hai," (A job is neither small nor big. A job is a job), he added, stressing that the department he has got was connected with people's welfare and urged reporters to shed "negativity". Both big allies are playing their small ministerial allotments another way. Sources in the two camps maintain that the interests of their respective states was their priority and not securing key portfolios. Both Nitish and Naidu are learnt to have pressed the demand for special financial concessions - and a special status category - to be accorded to their states and Modi is said to have promised "full support". "Let them (the BJP) take all the portfolios. The top priority of our leader

Chandrababu Naidu is to get funds for Andhra Pradesh's development. Money, money... that is our only demand," one TDP leader said. Newly appointed civil aviation minister, who will take charge after Naidu's swearing in as chief minister on Wednesday, too told reporters that the development of Amravati as the new capital of Andhra and the Polavaram irrigation project were their priorities. "Even as a civil aviation minister I can use my position in the government to get all the jobs done, like Amaravati and Polavaram," Ram Mohan Naidu said. In addition to financial concessions for Bihar, Nitish's other priority would also be to secure his dominant position in the alliance with his state due for polls next year. Nitish could leverage his support to the Modi government to extract a greater number of seats for his party to contest in Bihar, which the BJP has been eyeing for a while. In the 2020 assembly polls, the JDU could win just 43 seats compared to the BJP's 74 but Nitish managed to keep the CM's chair. This may not get repeated in 2025. How Modi handles the aspirations of his major allies going ahead would determine whether ride here on will be smooth or rocky.

LS Speaker election

After pulling off the portfolio distribution amicably, the upcoming hurdle to be crossed by Modi is the election of the new Lok Sabha Speaker. The TDP, sources said, continues to push for the post to be given to one of its MPs. BJP insiders, however, said they were confident of resolving the issue amicably. The name of D Purandeswari, the Andhra Pradesh BJP chief elected from the Rajahmundry seat, is doing the rounds as a compromise formula for the next Speaker. "The TDP would agree to Purandeswari since she is the daughter of TDP founder late N T Rama Rao and sister of Naidu's wife," one BJP leader said.

