

## Haj airfares not increased

The government Friday decided not to increase the airfare for Haj pilgrims this year despite the increase in fuel prices and the resultant hike in airfares the world over.

Union Information and Broadcasting Minister Priya Ranjan Dasmunsi told newsmen Friday: 'The union cabinet presided over by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has decided not to increase the airfares in spite of recommendations of the experts' committee.'

According to the minister, the experts' committee 'had examined the current inflationary trends and the consequent rise in plane fares the world over and recommended that the fare be increased from Rs.12,000 to Rs.16,000 per pilgrim'.

The concession will benefit 110,000 Haj pilgrims who will be flying to Jeddah this year for the annual pilgrimage. But the government will pass on the increased subsidy amount, of around Rs.400 million, to Air India (AI) that will ferry the Hajis.

Besides AI, the Saudi Arabian Airlines (SAA) will be carrying almost half the Hajis, numbering around 59,000, to Saudi Arabia.

This year, Air India has included Varanasi also as an embarkation point.

The subsidy will include the payment of airport tax levied by the Saudi government.

An amount of \$772 per pilgrim will be paid to SAA as return fare for carrying passengers from Mumbai, Delhi, [Ahmedabad](#) and [Hyderabad](#) and \$849 from [Chennai](#) and [Bangalore](#) plus insurance surcharge of \$10 per pilgrim from each station for each return seat.

Pilgrims will also be ferried by AI from Lucknow, Kolkata, Calicut, Nagpur, Aurangabad, Patna, Guwahati, Jaipur, [Srinagar](#) and Varanasi.

The movement of Haj pilgrims is due to commence later this month.

The experts' committee was headed by then chairman of the National Minorities' Commission Hamid Ansari, now the country's vice president, sources said.

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