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Hajj 'lottery' explained: The random draw for western pilgrims

As the Saudi government-organised ballot for Europe, Americas and Australia closes, Middle East Eye breaks down the key details of the new system



Muslim pilgrims gather on Mount Arafat, southeast of the Saudi holy city of Mecca, on Arafat Day, which is the climax of the Hajj pilgrimage (AFP/File photo)

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The Hajj "lottery" for western pilgrims closed on Monday, with prospective pilgrims finding out the status of their application over the next two days.

Last week, Saudi Arabia's Hajj ministry announced that Muslims from Europe, Australia and the Americas would need to apply to attend Hajj, which is taking place between 7-12 July this year, through a random draw on the government-backed Motawif website.

The Hajj pilgrimage is one of the largest religious gatherings in the world and is considered a religious obligation to be completed during the lifetime of every Muslim who is healthy and able to afford it.

For this year's pilgrimage, one million worshippers will participate after it had been scaled down because of the Covid-19 pandemic the previous two years. In 2019, around 2.5 million pilgrims participated.

The decision to change the process of travelling to Hajj for western Muslims has confused worshippers and travel agents alike, particularly given that the pilgrimage begins in less than one month.

The random lottery launched on Friday, and crashed briefly due to high demand.

Here's everything you need to know about the new ballot system.

Who can apply?

The random draw is applicable to all countries in North America, South America, non-Muslim majority countries in Europe, Australia and New Zealand.

All applicants must be under the age of 65, and must have completed two doses of the Covid-19 vaccination. Those attending must submit a negative PCR test within 72 hours of departing to Saudi Arabia.

Only those who haven't performed Hajj within the last five years are eligible to enrol.

The draw is the only way that Muslims from western countries can participate in this year's Hajj. Anyone who has prepaid to do the pilgrimage with a tour operator has been urged to request a refund.