

15.06 hrs.

The Lok Sabha re-assembled after Lunch at Six minutes Past Fifteen of the Clock.

[SHRI NITISH KUMAR *in the Chair*]

STATEMENT BY MINISTER

Loss of Lives and Injuries to Indian Pilgrims in the Fire at Mina during Haj on April 15, 1997

[English]

THE MINISTER OF STATE OF THE MINISTRY OF LAW AND JUSTICE (SHRI RAMAKANT D. KHALAP) : Sir, I fully share the deep concern of the hon. Members of this august House at the tragic death of Haj pilgrims from India in the fire at Mina in Saudi Arabia on April 15, 1997. The grievous loss of life and injuries to our Haj pilgrims from the fire caused profound shock and sorrow to the entire nation. I would like to convey on behalf of the Government sincere and heartfelt condolences to the next of kin of the deceased as well as our sympathies to those who suffered injuries and to the relatives of those who are still reported missing.

As hon. members of the House are aware, a large number of pilgrims from India perform Haj every year. Approximately 81,003 Indian nationals participated in the Haj this year. Of these, 53,664 came through the Central Haj Committee. The balance of approximately 27,000 came from India through tour operators, or from other countries or were residents in Saudi Arabia. The total number of pilgrims from all countries who performed Haj this year is approximately a little under two million.

A fire broke out in the pilgrim encampment in Mina, near Mecca, on April 15 at about 1130 hours local time (2 PM IST) and spread very rapidly, killing number of pilgrims and injuring many other. When the fire broke out, official teams of our Embassy and the Consulate General, camping in Mina took prompt action for orderly evacuation of our pilgrims to safer areas. Several lives were saved and injuries prevented due to this timely move. However, as many of the camps housing Indian pilgrims were located close to the point of origin of the fire and were in the path of the fire and because of the very rapid spread of the fire due to strong winds combined with local topography, many of these camps were destroyed and death and injury to several pilgrims could not be prevented.

As of today, the total number of Indian national identified as dead is 119 and the number of those reported missing is 111. Further, 148 persons are receiving treatment for burns in the Saudi Government hospitals. In addition another 265 persons were injured in the fire and its aftermath. Of these 172 persons are receiving treatment from the Indian medical mission in Mecca. Many of the injured have been discharged after treatment and some of these persons have since returned to India either on their assigned flights as per the Haj charter schedule arranged

by the Central Haj Committee or under arrangements made by private tour operators. Others are awaiting their arrangements made by private tour operators. Other are awaiting their assigned return flights under one of these two arrangements. These pilgrims continue to be under observation by the Indian medical mission in Saudi Arabia and are being rendered all necessary medical care. The Haj charter flights will complete the return journey of the pilgrims by May 22, 1997. Names of injured pilgrims on each return flights are being conveyed to India in advance by the Air India office in Jeddah so as to facilitate their reception on arrival in Delhi and other entry points as well as prompt medical attention and movement to hospitals and clinics as required. Reception of the pilgrims on return is being handled by the concerned State Haj Committee in co-ordination with MEA, Air India and immigration and customs authorities. The operation for identifying the deceased and to locate the missing is continuing.

Information on the details of the dead, injured and missing was initially very difficult to obtain because at the time of the fire the Haj was at its peak and involved an *en masse* movement of nearly 2 million people from different countries out of the Mina Camps. In this situation it was not possible to carry out an immediate count and identification of our pilgrims. This became possible only when the pilgrims reassembled in the encampment in Mina on April 17, Officers of the Embassy and the Consulate General then surveyed the camp and prepared a tentative list of the missing. A list of the injured was also prepared through visits to the hospital where they were being treated. Simultaneously identification of bodies kept in the mortuaries under the supervision of the Saudi authorities also took place on a continuous basis. This is, however, not an easy task as many of the bodies were charred beyond recognition. A more precise list of the missing was prepared after our pilgrims returned to Mecca on the evening of April 19 at the end of the Haj rites. This was done through systematic visits by our official teams to all the residential units allotted to our pilgrims and through verification and counting of individuals. On this basis the updated figures for those who are as yet unaccounted for is 111.

Immediately after the outbreak of the fire, control rooms were set up in New Delhi, Mumbai, Riyadh and Mecca and information obtained about the pilgrims was disseminated to the next of kin in India immediately as it became available. Names of pilgrims identified as dead as well as of the injured undergoing treatment, have been promptly and regularly made known through notifications, through media and through the State Haj Committees. This operation is continuing.

Under authorisation of the Government, our mission and the Consulate General in Saudi Arabia provided all possible immediate assistance and relief including financial help to the destitute and the injured and the families and friends of those missing. Food and drinking water was arranged for over 5000 pilgrims on the night of April 15

itself. On subsequent days, the following comprehensive routine was followed:

1. Visit the morgue near Mina with the relatives of the missing/dead to help identify the dead.
2. Daily visits to all the hospitals in Mecca and Mina by the Indian medical mission to ascertain position regarding the Indians injured.
3. Setting up of a special dressing room for burns in the main Indian dispensary in Mecca.
4. Making arrangements in all the nine branch dispensaries in Mecca for the treatment of the injured.
5. Daily visits by doctors of Indian mission to all the buildings housing Indian pilgrims through the Indian Pilgrims Welfare Forum, Jeddah, which is voluntary organisation of resident Indians.

The Government has taken a number of wide-ranging steps to provide succour and relief to the next of kin of the deceased and for those who were injured. Prime Minister has announced an ex-gratia relief payment of Rupees one lakh to each of the next of kin of dead and free treatment to the injured in government hospitals. Rs. 10,000 has been disbursed to each of the injured pilgrims presently receiving treatment in Saudi Arabia, the pilgrims who have been permanently disabled due to the fire will be given Rs. One lakh each. Government has offered to fly back to India by a special chartered flight our injured pilgrims who were medically fit to travel. However, these pilgrims preferred staying on in Mecca till their turn came for departure by their assigned flight under the Haj charter schedule. Government has also offered to transport the bodies of the deceased pilgrims back to India free of cost. The next of the kin of the pilgrims who have died have conveyed that they would wish the bodies to be buried in Mecca for religious reasons. Those who have lost their travel documents in the fire are being issued duplicate documents expeditiously and free of cost. CGI in Jeddah distributed cash and clothes to the needy pilgrims among the injured. Materials required to treat the injured that is bandages, cotton wool and ointments were airlifted to Jeddah by the Government of India.

I would like to record my appreciation of the generous and effective assistance and relief efforts of the Indian community in Jeddah.

A special arrangement has been made in the framework of the Haj cell of the Ministry of External Affairs for implementing the relief measures indicated above. Action for disbursement of relief payment has been initiated. Prime Minister has appointed a two-member Ministerial Committee consisting of Shri C.M. Ibrahim and Shri Maqbool Dar to oversee the implementation of these measures.

A four-member team comprising of three sitting MPs and one former MP visited Saudi Arabia on April 25 to May 1 to enquire about the welfare of the Indian pilgrims, particularly the injured and the next of kin, to advise on further relief measures as well as to take stock of the overall situation regarding missing pilgrims. Members of the team visited the injured in the hospitals and met a large number

of Indian pilgrims. They also held discussions with the Chairman of the South Asian Moussassa. The team has submitted a report to the Government which is being studied.

I would also like to bring to the notice of hon. Members that at present there is no requirement for private tour operators to intimate to Government or to the Central Haj Committee, particulars of the pilgrims who are travelling under their arrangements to Saudi Arabia for the Haj. As mentioned above, approximately 27,000 out of the total 81,000 Haj pilgrims from India fall in this category. Lack of information on these pilgrims has hampered the identification of the dead as well as the location of the missing. Our Embassy in Saudi Arabia and our Consulate General in Jeddah are making all efforts to obtain the names of these pilgrims from the Saudi authorities. Some details in this regard are available i.e., names of some of the tour operator agencies and the approximate number of pilgrims taken by each of them. For the future, Government is considering measures for filling this lacuna, i.e., by obtaining advance details of Haj pilgrims travelling under arrangements made by private tour operators, as well as regulating their work.

I would also like to bring to the attention of the hon. Members that in all our operations of taking stock of the missing, identifying the deceased and caring for the injured, we received full cooperation from the concerned Saudi Arabian authorities responsible for management of the Haj arrangements. The Medical treatment and care made available by the Saudi hospitals to our injured pilgrims won praise from the pilgrims as well as the team that visited Saudi Arabia.

As regards the question of compensation to the victims of the fire, I would like to state that it is not the practice of the Saudi Government to provide compensation in tragic events of this nature. As the Government was conscious of the need for immediate relief to the victims of the Mina fire, the above-mentioned immediate relief measures have been taken. We are examining long term measures such as provision of compulsory insurance to cover such unforeseen events.

Reports in the press on April 24 attributed certain views to the Indian Consul General in Jeddah about the tragic death of Indian pilgrims in the Mina fire. This matter has been examined very carefully and it is concluded that these views appear to be derived from information provided by a few of the injured relating to the conduct of an individual gate keeper. No broad generalisations can be made on this basis. The team that went to Saudi Arabia from April 25 to May 1 visited the site of the fire, have spoken to many pilgrims and concurred with this view.

I would like to convey to the hon. Members that Government is paying close attention to the safe return of all the Indian pilgrims to India and for the implementation of the relief arrangement announced by the Government.

Hon. Member will appreciate that the accidental fire at Mina and its immediate aftermath are totally unforeseen.

We are studying the event in detail to work out the steps required to avert such disasters in future.

KUMARI MAMATA BANERJEE (Calcutta South) : What about the missing persons? Is the Government taking any steps to locate them?

[Translation]

MR. CHAIRMAN : What will you ask after such detailed Statement?

[English]

KUMARI MAMATA BANERJEE : About 111 persons were missing. Is the Government taking any steps to find out the missing person?

[Translation]

MR. CHAIRMAN : Instructions have been given, what more can be done.

[English]

SHRI RAMAKANT D. KHALAP : Steps are being taken.

15.14 hrs:

MATTERS UNDER RULE 377

(i) **Need to implement Central Plans for desilting of Sagar Lake (M.P)**

[Translation]

SHRI VIRENDRA KUMAR (Sagar) : Sir, Sagar is known for its historical lake and it was spreaded over 400 acres of land, but now due to encroachments and silting this lake is shrinking day by day. The schemes have been formulated many times by the State and Central Governments for desilting the lake but the work of desilting the lake could not be done. There is lot of filth and silt in the lake. If desilting of this lake is not done, the very existence of this lake would be in danger. The water of this lake has become so polluted that outbreak of any dangerous disease can occur any time in people and in the animals going into this lake.

Therefore, the Central Government is requested to take up the work of desilting of this historical lake on priority basis so that problem of drinking water in Sagar can be solved and Sagar may leave an impression as a tourist place.

(ii) **Need for early completion of Rural Electrification work in Kodarma Parliamentary Constituency Bihar**

SHRI R.L.P. VERMA (Kodarma) : Mr. Chairman Sir, In order to ensure supply of electricity to the electrified villages of Kodarma Parliamentary Constituency, the then Chairman of Rural Electrification Corporation of India during 1980-84 accorded sanction to following power stations and funds were allocated for them. These places

are in district Giridih. (1) Khadagdiha (75% work has been completed. (2) Dwar Pahari, (3) Saria (50% work is completed) (4) Gande (Plant partially completed) (5) Virani (work not started) (6) Jainagar (80% work completed) (7) Markacho (work not started) (8) Barakatha (9) Satgaon in Kodarma district. Therefore, the Government is urged upon to furnish details of the allocations made for each of the above power stations and also an enquiry should be conducted about the irregularities committed and the work pertaining to these power stations should be completed by December, 1997.

(iii) **Need for early Construction of the Baji Rout Setu Over River Brahmani in Dhenkanal, Orissa**

[English]

SHRI K.P. SINGH DEO (Dhenkanal) : There has been an inordinate delay in the construction of the high level bridge over river Brahmani on the Nilakanthpur Bhuban Road connecting Mandar-Gondia, Deogaon, Kapilas and Dhenkanal. The project was accorded administrative approval in 1994, It is named after a great freedom fighter, 13 year old boatman Baji Rout who died in police firing at Village Nilakanthpur in 1938 and who is immortalised by the famous Oriya poet, Gnanpeeth award winner Sachi Raut Ray. The people, particularly the small and marginal farmers find great difficulties in marketing their produce due to lack of means of transport in the absence of a bridge. Six steel plants are coming in the area with the hope that the bridge would be constructed soon. Besides connecting the district headquarters Dhenkanal, it will provide a direct communication for the devotees to pay a visit to the famous holy shrine of Kapilash, the abode of Lord Chandrashekher, Therefore, the bridge will be the harbinger of progress, social empowerment and social mobility for a large segment of population living in an under-developed and backward area although having abundant natural resources. It will be a befitting memorial for freedom fighter Baji Rout if the bridge, named after him, is constructed in a year when the nation is celebrating its 50th year of independence. I request the Union Government to construct the Baji Rout Setu over river Brahmani in my constituency Dhenkanal without any further delay.

(iv) **Need to look into the grievancea of Handloom Weavers of Tamil Nadu, particularly of Kanyakumari District**

SHRI N. DENNIS (Nagercoil) : The handloom weavers of Tamil Nadu, particularly of Kanyakumari district are facing difficulties due to accumulation Handloom clothes in the primary societies, delay in supply of yarn and non-payment of rebates by the Government in time. The remuneration they get out of their hard labour is very low. So they are faced with the difficulty of not relying on weaving. They have become unemployed and poverty stricken and seeking employment opportunities in other field. So, I urge upon the Government to take immediate steps to clear the accumulation of stocks and make quick payment of rebates and timely supply of yarn and redress their other