

Int'l Lawyer: Multi-National Islamic Committee Should Run Hajj

TEHRAN (Tasnim) – A Canadian international human rights lawyer said a multi-national Islamic committee should undertake the responsibility of handling the annual Hajj pilgrimage in Saudi Arabia.

“In my opinion there should be a multi-national Islamic committee that should manage the more than two million pilgrims that make the Hajj each year. However, the Saudis see themselves as the 'Guardians' of Mecca and Medina and Islam's 2 most sacred mosques, the Masjid al-Haram in Mecca, the site of the Hajj pilgrimage, and Medina's Masjid an-Nabawi the burial site of the Prophet Mohammad (PBHU),”
Edward Corrigan, from Ontario, said in an exclusive interview with the Tasnim News Agency on Monday.

The following is the full text of the interview.

Q: In the past three days, many countries and Islamic figures and organizations have criticized Saudi Arabia for its incompetency and imprudence in organizing the big event as this is not the first time such a tragedy has happened. How do you think such a great annual event should be managed then? Do not you think that there should be a council of several Muslim countries instead of only Saudi Arabia because Mecca is not only the heritage of Saudi Arabia but also of the entire Muslim world?

A: It is clear that something has to be done. It is good that King Salman has ordered an investigation into the disaster. At least 769 people were killed including 169 Iranians. At least 934 pilgrims were injured. Many are still missing so the toll could be much higher. There also was the recent collapse of the crane which resulted in 109 deaths and many injuries. Unfortunately these recent tragedies are just the latest in a long list of tragedies:

2006: 364 pilgrims die in a crush at foot of Jamarat Bridge in Mina

1997: 340 pilgrims are killed when fire fuelled by high winds sweeps through Mina's tent city

1994: 270 pilgrims die in a stampede during the stoning ritual

1990: 1,426 pilgrims, mainly Asian, die in a stampede in an overcrowded tunnel leading to holy sites

1987: 402 people die when security forces break up an anti-US demonstration by Iranian pilgrims

In my opinion there should be a multi-national Islamic committee that should manage the more than 2 million pilgrims that make the Hajj each year. However, the Saudis see themselves as the "Guardians" of Mecca and Medina and Islam's 2 most sacred mosques, the Masjid al-Haram in Mecca, the site of the Hajj pilgrimage, and Medina's Masjid an-Nabawi the burial site of the Prophet Mohammad (PBHU).

Before the Saudis it was the Hashemites who were the protectors of Mecca and Medina until they were forced out by Ibn Saud. The Saud family see their role as protectors of Islam's most holy shrines as an important part of their legitimacy and prestige in the Islamic World. They do not want to lose control of this important annual Islamic event. However, a tragedy like this severely hurts their image and does affect their legitimacy. It is clear that something must be done. Compensation should be paid to the victims and their families.

However, it is doubtful that the Saudis will allow themselves to be sued in Saudi Arabia. There is no recourse to the International Criminal Court (ICC) as Saudi Arabia is not a state party to the ICC so

only the court's prosecutor can file charges. In my opinion there is probably not criminal liability only civil liability. There is a possibility of filing a case at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) but this would largely be a symbolic measure as the ICJ does not have jurisdiction over criminal matters and cannot enforce civil judgments.

Q: Do you believe that Saudi Arabia is no longer able to manage and provide safety and security for a crowd of two million Muslim pilgrims in an event that the circumstances are well-known beforehand?

A: It is clear that the number of pilgrims has grown massively over the past years. The Saudis have made some significant improvements but problems still remain. There were improvements made to the Jamarat pillars 9 years ago that improve movement at what was a dangerous choke point where several major tragedies had occurred. The new bridge reportedly can accommodate 300,000 pilgrims an hour along its 950-meter length. There are also reports that a Saudi Royal convoy was in the area and that traffic was diverted which caused a deadly convergence in the town of Mina on the outskirts of Mecca. This report needs to be properly investigated by independent authorities. The intense heat is also a concern.

Q: According to reports, the caretaking staff appointed by the Saudi government to be in charge of this year's Hajj are not properly trained and lack essential skills to run the big event. Do not you think that this failure is mainly because the Saudi government is using its experienced and well-trained forces in wars with its neighboring countries?

A: I do think that the Saudi attack on Yemen is a factor. Many Saudi troops have been committed to the campaign in Yemen. This war is taking away a significant amount of manpower and the lack of trained and experienced manpower definitely could have played a role in the disaster.