

# **SPEECH ON BEHALF OF DEPUTY MINISTER EBRAHIM EBRAHIM AT SAHUC HAJJ AWARENESS PROGRAMME in JOHANNESBURG**

Delivered by MEC – Gauteng Legislature – Mr. Ismail Vadi

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Respected Ulema

Mr Shaheen Essop, (SAHUC President)

Members of the SAHUC Executive

Brothers and Sisters

Deputy Minister Ebrahim felt very honoured when he received the invitation from SAHUC's Executive Committee to speak at this function. However, he extends his sincere apologies for not being here today. Unfortunately, he was involved in an accident a few days ago and is physically indisposed. Therefore, he has kindly asked me to represent him at this event.

He thought it might interest you to share our perspectives on the South African Haj Mission and the role that our Government is playing to support Muslims from our country who annually fulfil this important religious and spiritual duty.

The South African government sees its role as a valued partner in the annual Haj Mission. We believe it is part of our diplomatic responsibility to provide the necessary support to make this lifetime, religious journey as comfortable as possible. Government sees itself as acting in partnership with SAHUC specifically and Muslim South Africans in general based on the credo that "together, we can do more".

South African Muslims have always been allowed to perform the Hajj, even during the times of apartheid. A special dispensation existed at the time, which allowed our pilgrims to visit the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to perform their religious duties, even though South African passport holders were not allowed to enter the country for business or other reasons.

Shortly after our first democratic elections in 1994, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia requested that a representative body, recognised by our government, should be established to facilitate all matters relating to Haj. Hence, the former Deputy Minister Aziz Pahad had taken the initiative to facilitate the process of forming SAHUC.

Underlying this initiative was also the recognition by Deputy Minister Pahad that the Haj, despite its religious importance, had become a bit of a free-for-all. A good many pilgrims were being exploited; prices were severely inflated; services or products promised were often inferior to what was expected or promised, and in many cases not provided at all. There was general consensus

that the Haj - if not formally regulated - should at least be better organised and co-ordinated in order to ensure that our pilgrims were better protected.

Government also emphasised that in terms of our Constitution it would be inappropriate for our Government to manage the affairs of a religious community, be they Muslims undertaking the Hajj, or South Africans of the Christian, Jewish, Hindu or other faiths undertaking pilgrimages to sites and places that are of religious significance to them. With the establishment of SAHUC, government was comfortable to leave the practical management of the Haj and Umrah to the Muslim community itself.

Since 1994, the Saudi Government's special dispensation for South African pilgrims has ended. No longer would South African citizens be granted visas on arrival in the Kingdom, but they would also be subjected to a Haj quota that was determined by a Committee of the Organisation of Islamic Co-operation (OIC). That Committee noted that in 1950 for example, the total number of pilgrims performing the Haj was less than 100 000. By 1972, it had reached 645 000. In 1983, the number of pilgrims coming from outside Saudi Arabia surpassed one million for the first time. Due to the rapidly increasing numbers, the OIC passed a resolution in 1988 that stipulated that the equivalent of 0.1 per cent of the Muslim population of each country would be allowed to perform Haj every year.

South Africa was allocated a quota of 2 500 per annum, based on an estimated Muslim population of 2.5 million, even though the actual size of our community is much smaller. In spite of this quota, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia had until 2011 allowed 5 000 pilgrims to go for Haj.

The Government of Saudi Arabia is continuously trying to improve the infrastructure at the Holy sites. You will be aware that it has started major renovations in Mecca in recent years. One of the objectives is to accommodate more pilgrims during the Hajj, but the immediate effect has been that the quotas of all countries were reduced by 20 per cent since 2013. This resulted in the reduction of the South African quota to 2 000 and it is anticipated that this figure will remain until at least after the Haj of 2015.

I am referring to the issue of quotas in some detail, because I am aware that it is a sensitive matter in the community and that SAHUC is often unfairly criticised for not doing more to secure a higher quota. It is really a matter that is not entirely in the hands of SAHUC and an area in which Government has tried to assist. There have been interventions at the level of Head of State and I have personally requested the Government of Saudi Arabia in various interactions to allow for an increase in our quota. We must understand that the Government of Saudi Arabia faces tremendous challenges to accommodate the growing numbers and must sometimes take unpopular, but necessary decisions.

I must say that I have been following events and engaging with many role players involved in the Hajj industry over the years. I am at pains to understand why this industry and its many role players have not yet set aside their disagreements, of which there are many, to work together to make Hajj as affordable and as problem-free as possible. Each and every one has a role to play in making Hajj a success.

SAHUC has played an important role in this process and we will continue to give our full support through our Ambassador and Consul-General based in Saudi Arabia. SAHUC also has to become more accessible to all and listen to the grievances of the community. You have the right to convey any grievances which you may have to SAHUC, although we would prefer that there be a positive and constructive engagement with them. As the public and as SAHUC, our objective remains the same, namely, to set up the best structures and processes to make the Hajj the experience that we all dream it should be.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, through the Ministry of Hajj, has also put in place a number of regulations that protect the pilgrim from unscrupulous Tour Operators. Without going into too much detail, when you as the accredited pilgrim enter into an agreement with your Tour Operator - a written one I sincerely hope - the Saudi Ministry of Haj will hold all Tour Operators liable for any broken promises and agreements. If the Tour Operator advertises that your accommodation is 200 meters from the sacred mosque, but when you arrive there it is actually one kilometre from the mosque, you have the right to immediately report this discrepancy to SAHUC, who in turn should report this to the Ministry of Haj. The Ministry will, if your grievance is legitimate, immediately move you to accommodation in line with the agreement that you signed and the Tour Operator will have to reimburse the funds to the Haj Ministry and also stands to be blacklisted. It is your right as the pilgrim to demand from the Tour Operator to receive all the amenities and services that you have paid for. Of course, this is also not the time to start making outrageous demands bearing in mind that hajj is a spiritual journey and whilst you may expect the best, remember that three million other worshippers are also competing for the same space and necessities.

Our message to SAHUC is thus to keep the public informed of what steps have been taken, whether it is on the accreditation process for pilgrims or the selection of Mission workers who take time off from their respective jobs to assist the pilgrims during the Hajj. SAHUC remains the de facto recognized body that facilitates the performance of Haj annually.

To the Travel fraternity, we acknowledge the important role that you play in your efforts to make Hajj as affordable as possible. We strongly urge you to continue along this path and also assist, where possible, to help those less fortunate and under privileged to perform the Hajj. Our wish is to see more pilgrims from the Black communities also perform the Haj. Go to these communities in the townships and assist those who would also like to perform hajj to do so.

As we celebrate the 20th year of our democracy, the commitment of the South African Government remains very strong to ensure that every measure is taken to enable as many South African Muslims as possible to perform the Hajj. As I had mentioned, I have personally taken up the matter of a possible increase in the South African quota with the Minister of Hajj. I am aware too that the South African Ambassador in Riyadh, Ambassador Sadick Jaffer, and our Consul-General in Jeddah, Ebrahim Edries, both have raised this issue with relevant Government officials at every opportunity. It is our strong hope that for the Hajj of 2016, the South African quota will be increased to a figure that is more acceptable to those who are waiting to be accredited.

In conclusion I want to urge SAHUC to continue to carry out this high level mandate to deliver on the aspirations and needs of the pilgrims. There can be no higher duty to the Almighty than carrying out the calling to serve the pilgrims to the best of your ability. Your leadership in this regard would continue to be tested as it has been tested in the past. But we know that SAHUC has the capacity to rise to greater heights and to out-perform your previous level of service and commitment.

I would like to express our continued support to you and our appreciation for the service that you are rendering to our pilgrims. We acknowledge your role and look forward to our further collaboration and engagement for the greater good of our country, our citizens, and to all those to whom we are obligated to deliver the very best of services.

Shukran

Was salaam mu alaykum w/w.