

IRAN DISCUSSES HAJJ SAFETY WITH SAUDIS

TEHRAN: An Iranian delegation has held talks in Saudi Arabia about the safety of pilgrims after a deadly stampede at last year's hajj, an official said yesterday. It is the first dialogue between the rival powers since a diplomatic crisis erupted in January. The head of the Iranian Hajj Organisation, Said Ohadi, told Iranian state television that discussions over the pilgrims' welfare began on Thursday in Makkah. "We asked that... the safety of Iranian pilgrims be ensured and that pilgrims travel to Saudi Arabia only on Iranian aircraft," Ohadi was quoted as saying.

Iran and Saudi Arabia stand on opposing sides in conflicts in Syria and Yemen. The death of more than 2,000 foreign pilgrims, including 464 Iranians, in the stampede at last year's hajj in Saudi Arabia also caused a major spike in tensions. Riyadh severed diplomatic ties with Iran in January after its diplomatic missions in Tehran and Mashhad were stormed and set alight by mobs following the Sunni kingdom's execution of a prominent Shiite cleric.

This year's annual hajj - a pilgrimage to the Saudi city of Makkah that all Muslims are expected to perform at least once in their lifetime - is due to take place in September. So far, the Riyadh government has taken no action to compensate the families of Iranian victims, according to Ohadi. — AFP

OBAMA TO MEET LEADERS IN SAUDI ARABIA, EUROPE

WASHINGTON: US President Barack Obama will strategize with his Middle Eastern and European counterparts on a broad range of issues during a weeklong trip to Saudi Arabia, England and Germany with efforts to rein in the Islamic State group being the common denominator in all three stops. Obama, who begins traveling next week, recently said defeating IS his No. 1 priority. He paid a rare visit to CIA headquarters this week for a national security team meeting focused on countering the group.

The president is scheduled to arrive in the Saudi capital of Riyadh on Wednesday, where he will hold talks with King Salman. Obama will also attend a summit hosted by leaders of six Gulf countries that are members of the Gulf Cooperation Council: Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain and Oman. The summit follows a similar gathering that Obama hosted with the Gulf leaders last year at the Camp David presidential retreat. The White House arranged last year's meeting largely to reassure Gulf leaders who were unnerved by a deal the US and other world powers negotiated with Iran to ease economic sanctions in exchange for limits on its nuclear program.

The Iran deal is now in force, and the meeting next week will focus on defeating the Islamic State militants and Al-Qaeda, as well as regional security issues that include Iran. Obama will spend most of his time in England. He is scheduled to meet again with Queen Elizabeth II over lunch at Windsor Castle on April 22, a visit that coincides with her 90th birthday a day earlier. Obama will also meet with British Prime Minister David Cameron, who is campaigning for his country to continue its membership in the European Union. Britons are scheduled to vote on its EU membership in a June 23 referendum, the first vote ever by a nation on whether to leave the 28-member, post-World War II bloc.

Obama is not expected to announce a position on the referendum, although aides have voiced support for a strong United Kingdom as a member of the EU. "He'll make clear that this is a matter the British people themselves will decide when they head to the polls in June," Ben Rhodes, Obama's deputy national security adviser, said Thursday as he outlined the trip for reporters. Cameron has also been stung by criticism over his investment in an offshore trust run by his late father. The revelation was part of the recent dump of more than 11 million documents from a Panama law firm that is one of the leaders in setting up offshore bank accounts for the rich and powerful.

Obama also plans a town hall-style, question-and-answer session with young adults, which has become a staple of his foreign trips. Additional stops were being planned for London. In Germany, the final stop on Obama's three-country trip, the president will hold talks and a news conference on Sunday with Chancellor Angela Merkel. Merkel's popularity has suffered after she angered Germans by allowing a massive resettlement of refugees from Syria and other war-torn countries. She recently helped broker a deal between the EU and Turkey to stem the refugee flow to Europe. — AP



ISTANBUL: Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan (center) waves during the end of the closing session of 13th Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) Summit at the Istanbul Congress Center (ICC) yesterday. — AFP

ISLAMIC SUMMIT CONDEMNS IRAN OVER 'TERROR SUPPORT'

ERDOGAN WRAPS UP MEET PROMOTING UNITY

ISTANBUL: A major summit aimed at overcoming differences in the Muslim world condemned Iran yesterday for supporting terrorism and meddling in the affairs of other countries. Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, who had been at the two-day Istanbul conference along with over 30 other heads of state and government from Islamic countries, did not attend the closing meeting in protest at the criticisms. "The (Organization of Islamic Cooperation) Conference deplored Iran's interference in the internal affairs of the states of the region and other member states including Bahrain, Yemen, Syria, and Somalia, and its continued support for terrorism," said the summit's final statement.

It also "condemned Hezbollah for conducting terrorist activities in Syria, Bahrain, Kuwait and Yemen and for supporting terrorist movements and groups undermining the security and stability of OIC member states". The Arab League declared Iran's ally Hezbollah a "terrorist" group in March after Gulf kingdoms did the same earlier in the month over the movement's support for the Damascus regime in Syria's war.

There was a security lockdown around the summit venue in Istanbul, the former capital of the Ottoman Empire from where sultans for centuries ruled Muslims from the Balkans to Arabia. Turkey has been on high alert following attacks claimed by the Islamic State group and increased violence linked to the Kurdish conflict. While the summit marked one of Istanbul's most significant gatherings of heads of state for years, some high profile leaders like Jordan's King Abdullah and Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi were notable by their absence.

Turkey's relations with Cairo have still not recovered from the 2013 ousting of Islamist president Mohamed Morsi, a close ally of Ankara, while ties with Amman are being tested by differences over Syria. Iran's Rouhani is due to meet Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Ankara today. With Turkey seeing the summit as a chance to shore up its prestige in the Islamic world, Erdogan has made it his mission at the meeting to bring the world's 1.7 billion Muslims closer together. He reaffirmed his call for unity at an official dinner late Thursday in the Dolmabahce Palace by the Bosphorus.

"At this summit, our biggest expectation is for Islamic countries throughout the world to give a message of unity and togetherness to all Muslims," Erdogan told leaders beneath the dome of the vast Muayede Salon, the ceremonial hall where the sultan would receive visitors. "Our aim is to give the whole Islamic family hope in the future. God willing, with this summit, a new era will begin for all of us. Of course the problems in front of us are big. We are going through a tough period. But we should never lose hope," he added.

The meeting has been marked by signs of a strong emerging alliance between Turkey and fellow Sunni Muslim power Saudi Arabia, whose foreign ministers Thursday signed a memorandum on creating a bilateral cooperation council. Both countries, along with the tiny but gas-rich Gulf state of Qatar, back rebels fighting the regime of President Bashar Al-Assad in Syria. This pits them against Iran and also Russia - with whom Turkey is experiencing a crisis in relations after the downing of a Russian warplane - who are the last major remaining allies of Assad. — Agencies

BATTLES AROUND ALEPPO CAST SHADOW OVER PEACE TALKS

BEIRUT: Fierce fighting raged yesterday around Syria's Aleppo as a surge in violence forced tens of thousands more to flee their homes, overshadowing the latest round of peace talks in Geneva. The clashes on several fronts have put a strain on a fragile ceasefire in place since Feb 27, and left more than 200 fighters on all sides of the civil war dead in recent days. The delegation representing President Bashar al-Assad's regime arrived yesterday in Geneva where UN-brokered indirect talks between representatives of the government and opposition were due to be held.

However, the fighting around Syria's second city Aleppo cast a shadow over international efforts to end the five-year war, which has left more than 270,000 people dead and forced millions to flee their homes. Troops and militiamen loyal to Assad's regime have fought Islamic State group fighters to the southeast of Aleppo city this week, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said. They also battled jihadists from the Al-Qaeda-affiliated Al-Nusra Front and allied rebels in the flashpoint area of Handarat north of Aleppo city, it said.

Meanwhile IS fought rebels near the Turkish border, the Britain-based monitor added. "What is happening in Aleppo is a major violation of the ceasefire," rebel commander Major Eyad Shamsi told AFP in Geneva, blaming the regime. "A big battle is being fought in Aleppo, and it will lead to a major disaster should the regime succeed" in cutting off the route linking rebel-held parts of Aleppo to the northern countryside, he said. In that case, "a million people will come under siege in (opposition-controlled parts of) Aleppo," he added. — AFP