



MAKKAH: Muslim pilgrims circle the Kaaba, Islam's holiest shrine, at the Grand Mosque yesterday. — AP

FROM PRAYER BEADS TO CLOCKS, THE RETAIL RITES OF HAJJ

SEASON FOR GIFT GIVING?

MAKKAH: After spending thousands of dollars to reach Makkah for the hajj, Muslim pilgrims face another unavoidable cost—for the armfuls of gifts they are expected to take home. Even before this year's pilgrimage rites begin on Saturday, Sidi Mokhtar Dembele from Mali said he has already spent the equivalent of more than \$850 on prayer beads, prayer rugs and other souvenirs for family and friends.

The annual pilgrimage is first and foremost a spiritual journey, with close to two million faithful visiting the sites where their Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) performed the same rites 1,400 years ago. But religious tourism is also an industry which Saudi Arabia, home to Islam's two holiest sites, plans to develop under its wide-ranging "Vision 2030" project to diversify its oil-dependent economy.

While the number of annual hajj pilgrims is relatively constant, the kingdom wants to foster a year-round religious tourism sector relying on those who perform the umrah, or lesser pilgrimage, at any time of the year. By 2020, Saudi Arabia wants 15 million umrah visitors annually, up from six million.

Dembele, 54, a customs inspector who wears a traditional blue robe and a white skull-cap, said shopping was part of the religious obligation. "It's what the Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) asked us to do. Bring back gifts for family and friends," he said in a cluttered street of Makkah lined with stalls.

Another pilgrim, Mohammed Hassan from



MAKKAH: Muslim pilgrims walk away after the last prayer of the day, leaving the Grand Mosque on Wednesday. — AFP