

Egypt was making purchases just a few dozen metres (yards) from the Grand Mosque, the holiest site in Islam. There, on Ibrahim al-Khalil Avenue, shops compete with flashing lights and signs in a myriad of languages. "I already bought some abayas, prayer beads, perfume, prayer rugs and incense," the 61-year-old Egyptian engineer said.

Abayas are head-to-toe black robes worn according to tradition by Saudi women. Grimacing, Hassan said his total budget is 3,000 riyals (\$800), a substantial sum on top of around \$6,700 for airfare and hotels in Mecca and Medina, the second holy city.

The cost is unavoidable, he said, because "family and friends will be proud of these souvenirs. They have real value. They are priceless." Dressed in a jalabiya robe and smiling as he tried to force his way through the crowded street, he said his children will be able to tell everyone: "Papa brought me this from the Kaaba."

Muslims across the world pray in the direction of Kaaba, the black cube which stands in the middle of the Haram or sacred site at the Grand Mosque. Many pilgrims from poor countries in Africa or Asia cannot, like Hassan, pay for hajj themselves. They make the journey courtesy of their governments and may live in cheap hostels, or even in the street.

**Business good**

Foreign pilgrims last year spent almost 20 billion riyals (\$5.3 billion) during the hajj, according to the Makkah Chamber of Commerce and Industry. More than 1.4 million overseas pilgrims are expected to perform this year's hajj, alongside hundreds of thousands of Saudi-based faithful.

Gamal Hamada, an Egyptian who will perform the hajj with his wife, said "we saved our



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

entire life" to realise the dream of hajj, and it is an obligation to return home loaded with gifts. The hajj formally lasts six days but pilgrims arrive earlier.

One vendor, Maged Abdullah, said daily revenue at his small shop selling prayer rugs and Islamic clothes is already running at between 20,000 and 25,000 riyals. His neighbor Ali Abu Saadi agreed that things are going well.

Saadi's shop overflows with trinkets made in China as customers jostle—"those who are rich as well as those who are poor", said the Yemeni, 66. Yet in Makkah there is more on offer than just the plastic prayer beads or windup clocks, mass-produced in Asia, which alert Muslims to their five-daily prayers.

Outside the Grand Mosque, on mats on the ground, other vendors propose a return to the simpler time of the Prophet, selling traditional

incense, or sticks of miswak, wooden "natural tooth brushes" often seen protruding from the lips of pilgrims. Sold for a few riyals, even miswak forms part of the religious rite. "Most gifts have a religious significance, helping those close to us who remain in our country feel the passion of the hajj," said Omar Sar, a 58-year-old from Senegal. "With these gifts, we inspire them to reinforce their faith that they too will come to Makkah." — AFP

## MUSLIMS CROWD MAKKAH AHEAD OF HAJJ CLOSE TO 1.5 MILLION ATTEND

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At prayer time, access to the Kaaba is suspended and the walk around it is stopped to avoid overcrowding. It is one of several safety measures authorities say they have implemented after, according to data from foreign officials, close to 2,300 pilgrims died during the hajj stoning ritual last year. The stampede and security had been on the mind of a pilgrim from Ivory Coast, who gave her name only as Mrs Coulibaly, 49. "But since arriving at the airport we have been taken charge of and well supervised. So I feel at ease and totally dedicated to my

prayers," she said.

For the first time in almost three decades Iranians will not join the pilgrimage after talks between Tehran and Riyadh on logistics and security fell apart in May. Iran sent 60,000 pilgrims last year, and claimed the largest number of stampede fatalities, at 464. Sunni-dominated Saudi Arabia and Shiite Iran are regional rivals who have had no diplomatic relations since early this year.

They are at odds over a number of regional issues including Syria and Yemen.

Verbal sparring between the two Islamic powers has intensified ahead of this year's pilgrimage. — AFP



MAKKAH: A child holds on to his father as he circles the Kaaba, Islam's holiest shrine, at the Grand Mosque yesterday. — AFP



MAKKAH: Muslim pilgrims pray the Fajr prayer before sunrise, outside the Grand Mosque yesterday. — AFP



MAKKAH: Muslim pilgrims perform Wudu, a ritual washing before prayers, just outside the Grand Mosque yesterday. — AFP