

# MUSLIM AMERICANS WELCOME FIRST NY EID SCHOOL HOLIDAY

**NEW YORK:** New York marks a milestone in the fight for equality Thursday when 1.1 million children in America's largest school district will take the day off to mark Eid Al-Adha. It is a small but hard-won victory at a time when American Muslims complain of growing Islamophobia and worsening anti-Muslim rhetoric following the 9/11 attacks in 2001. For the first time, more than 1,800 public schools in New York will close for the Muslim feast of sacrifice, a day after also closing for Yom Kippur, the holiest day in the Jewish calendar.

Mayor Bill de Blasio unveiled the new policy in March, announcing that New York public schools would get two days off for Eid Al-Fitr, which falls during the summer, and Eid Al-Adha, in addition to major Christian and Jewish holidays. Since then, city hall has added a further day off-February 8, 2016 — for Lunar New Year, celebrated by Asian-Americans.

"It is a huge victory to actually see the day come," says Linda Sarsour, a member of the Coalition for Muslim School Holidays and a New York activist with three children. "As an imam as well as a parent I am very happy," agreed Imam Shamsi Ali, director of the Jamaica Muslim Center in Queens. "I'm sure this kind of policy from the government side will push Muslims further to feel a sense of belonging," he said.

Muslim New York parents previously faced a quandary: keep their children at home to observe the holiday and skip class, or send them to school and let celebrations fall by the wayside. There are an estimated seven to 10 million Muslims in America, of whom a million are believed to live in New York-about 10 percent of the city's population. New York follows at least seven other school districts that close for Eid in New Jersey, Massachusetts and Vermont, but activists are still campaigning in other parts of the country.

Activists hope that embracing Eid in the school calendar will make Islam more mainstream and counter Islamophobia.

"It's a very tense time," Sarsour told AFP. "No one can talk about Islam without talking about terrorism." In the last two weeks alone, a Sikh American was so viciously beaten in Chicago and called a "terrorist" because of his dark skin, beard and turban that he wound up in the hospital. In Detroit, a mosque was refused planning permission and in Texas, a 14-year-old Muslim teenager who is the son of Sudanese immigrants was arrested for building a clock that teachers thought was a bomb.

At the weekend, Republican candidate for president, African-American retired neurosurgeon Ben Carson, said a Muslim should not be president of the United States. Billionaire Donald Trump, top of the Republican polls in the 2016 race, was roundly condemned for not challenging a town hall questioner who said Barack Obama was a foreign-born Muslim.

Then there are daily headlines about extremists in Syria, arrests of American sympathizers and Islamist terrorism that many say feeds paranoia about Muslims in the United States. Ibrahim Hooper, spokesman for the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), the country's largest Muslim civil liberties organization, agreed that the holiday comes at the right time. "Amidst a spike in anti-Muslim sentiment and anti-Muslim rhetoric in our society as we see with Trump, Ben Carson, and the arrest of a Muslim teenager, which sends a negative message, this sends a very positive message of inclusion," he said.

But if New York sets a precedent, it is still an uphill struggle. "It was fabulous, oh my gosh!" enthused activist Zainab Chaudry, who was disappointed when Montgomery county in Maryland refused to make Eid a day off and removed all religious references to pre-existing Christian and Jewish holidays. — AFP



An Afghan woman leads a sheep at a livestock market ahead of the sacrificial Eid Al-Adha festival in Herat yesterday. — AFP

# PILGRIMS THROG ARAFAT AS HAJJ REACHES...

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There they will gather pebbles for a symbolic stoning of the devil ritual today, which is also the Eid Al-Adha feast of sacrifice marked by the world's more than 1.5 billion Muslims.

The day spent in Mount Arafat is one of the few times during the hajj that all pilgrims are in the same location at the same time - and is often described as the most moving experience of the hajj. "This is the place where the Prophet (PBUH)... had his last hajj all the way from Makkah to here. We are following his footsteps," said Abdul Halim Yusuf-Ali, a 21 year-old Islamic studies student from Kenya.

Yusuf-Ali was among thousands praying at Mount Arafat before sunrise yesterday. He said it was more important than ever for Muslims to heed the words from the Prophet's (PBUH) last sermon, calling for unity and equality. "It is very important because now Muslims' political situation is very chaotic and many Muslims are being killed every day, and it is just the other way around from what the Prophet emphasized," Yusuf-Ali added.

This year's gathering is about the same size as last year's, with 1.4 million foreign pilgrims joining hundreds of thousands of Saudis and residents of the kingdom. They are undeterred by a construction crane collapse at Makkah's Grand Mosque earlier this month that killed 109 people, including foreign pilgrims. About 400 people were injured by the crane which was working on an expansion of Islam's holiest site.

Previously marred by stampedes and fires that killed hundreds, the pilgrimage had been largely incident-free for the past nine years after safety improvements. The hajj is among the five pillars of Islam and every capable Muslim must perform it at least once in a lifetime. This year's gathering takes place against a backdrop of increased jihadist violence in some Muslim countries, a surge of the potentially deadly MERS virus and the war in Saudi Arabia's neighbor Yemen. About 100,000 police have been deployed to secure pilgrimage sites and manage the crowds.

Authorities say they are on alert for possible attacks by extremists, after Islamic State group jihadists bombed security forces and Shiite mosques in the kingdom in recent months. This year's hajj also comes with Saudi Arabia leading an Arab coalition conducting air strikes and supporting local forces in Yemen against Iran-backed rebels. Most Yemeni pilgrims performing the hajj this year already reside in the kingdom.

Among other challenges facing Saudi authorities is

potential transmission of the deadly Middle East Respiratory Syndrome coronavirus (MERS-CoV). The capital saw a jump in infections last month, but health officials say there has never been a case of MERS infection among pilgrims. The health ministry has mobilized thousands of medical workers to help ensure a virus-free pilgrimage and to care for routine ailments. Pilgrims began the hajj on Tuesday by entering ihram, a state of purity in which they must not quarrel, wear perfume, or cut their nails or hair. During ihram, men wear a seamless two-piece shroud-like white garment, while women must wear loose dresses, generally also white, exposing only their faces and hands.

The clothing emphasizes their unity, regardless of whether they spend the hajj in Makkah's five-star hotels or in shabby highrise hostels. "I'm hoping for mercy and that Allah accepts our prayers," said Pakistani pilgrim Abdeghafour Abu Bakr, 38, who came with friends. "What is left of our Arab nation? Iraq was the symbol of power and civilization. What happened to it now? Look at Syria: the refugees are greater in number than the pilgrims here," said Egyptian Mohammed Rizq, 65. "I wish everyone could come here. I am sure they would leave with a good heart because here Islam was born," said Abdullah, a Chinese convert to Islam.

Since the 2011 Arab uprisings, Iraq, Syria and Yemen have collapsed into civil war, Libya is paralyzed by conflict and refugee crises have upended life for many in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. Egypt remains politically fragile and Palestinians still have no state. Over breakfast, a group of pilgrims from different countries quizzed an Iraqi man who had fled an area controlled by the Islamic State militant group, which has seized swathes of Iraq and Syria and staged attacks elsewhere. "Islam is mercy. How did they turn it into a curse, a punishment?" said one man.

Earlier, in the city of Makkah, a Yemeni pilgrim said he hoped peace might soon return to his country, where a Saudi-led Arab coalition this year joined the government's side in a civil war that has killed thousands, including by its own airstrikes. "I have a million wishes. The first and the last is to have the happy Yemen back: the free and united Yemen," he said. A Syrian pilgrim simply called down curses on President Bashar Al-Assad, who is waging a war to end a four-year rebellion against his rule. "Bashar goes to hell," was his wish. But pilgrims also prayed for personal matters. Abdullah, the Chinese pilgrim, expressed his hopes for the coming year. "I wish my wife heals from her sickness, my son finishes school and my manager gives me the promotion I deserve," he said. — Agencies

# SISI PARDONS TWO JAZEERA JOURNOS

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After their sentencing last month, Egypt summoned the British ambassador to Cairo for criticizing the ruling. The United States and the United Nations had led calls for the journalists' release. Their arrest in December 2013 came at a time of heightened unrest and a deadly crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood following Islamist president Mohamed Morsi's overthrow by the military. At the time, Qatar, which owns Al-Jazeera, had been supportive of the Islamists.

Fahmy, who dropped his Egyptian citizenship to qualify for deportation like Greste, is expected to leave for Canada where has been offered a teaching post once he is freed. He has asked Sisi to return his Egyptian citizenship, in a local newspaper article published yesterday. The pardons yesterday came on the eve of the Muslim holiday of Eid, when prisoner releases often take place in Muslim countries.

Sisi has faced also mounting calls to release activists such as Seif and Sallam, a human rights worker detained after a small protest outside the presidential

palace in 2014. The two women were charged with holding an illegal protest, under a law that bans all but police-sanctioned protests, and sentenced to three years in jail. No official list was immediately issued of those pardoned yesterday, leaving it unclear whether other secular activists such as Alaa Abdel Fattah and Ahmed Maher were included. It was also not known if the pardon covered Mahmoud Abu Zeid, a photographer arrested in August 2013 as hundreds of Islamist protesters were killed in clashes with police clearing two Cairo sit-ins.

Thousands of Islamists, including Morsi, have been arrested since his overthrow, and scores sentenced to death. But the crackdown on the Islamists has also extended to secular leaning activists who had supported Morsi's overthrow after his divisive year in power. Sisi, the former army chief who was elected president in 2014, remains popular with many Egyptians seeking stability and end to unrest in the wake of the country's 2011 revolution that toppled longtime strongman Hosni Mubarak. He has vowed to steer clear of court cases out of respect for the judiciary's independence. — AFP



CAIRO: Canadian Al-Jazeera English journalist Mohamed Fahmy (second left) and his Egyptian colleague Baher Mohammed celebrate with their wives after being released from Torah prison yesterday. — AP

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