

Makkah's Zamzam Mafia Is Active Once Again

Badea Abu Al-Naja, Arab News

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MAKKAH, 24 September 2007 — Citizens and visitors in Makkah this year hoped for a hassle-free filling system at the Zamzam refill station near Kuday roundabout. However, they have been shocked to find a gang of overstayers monopolizing the water distribution.

The Zamzam mafia sells holy water, which is available free of charge, at SR16 per gallon. Arab News toured the area to see the illegal activities of the Zamzam mafia — mainly illegal Africans and South Asian nationals, especially Burmese.

The Zamzam mafia is effectively managing a monopoly of Zamzam taps and prevents pilgrims and visitors from filling their cans with water. If any of the gang members manning the taps leaves, then another member of the gang takes his place.

One wonders why there are no policemen at the location to stamp out this problem. People are unable to obtain even a drop of water unless they pay the gang members small fees. The mafia also physically pushes people away and is known to beat people who "invade their turf."

The absence of police or officials at the location offers the overstayers a perfect opportunity to make a fast buck. Arab News also discovered that some overstayers and foreign residents adulterate Zamzam water with ordinary water and sell it to pilgrims as pure Zamzam. The absence of authority has allowed the Zamzam station to become dirty with spilt water everywhere — something that poses a serious health hazard.

Arab News also learned that the various gangs that make up the Zamzam mafia fix prices and have an agreement not to step into each other's turf. They also buy hundreds of empty cans to sell to pilgrims.

I approached one of the members — a Burmese man, and told him that I wanted to fill 500 Zamzam cans. "Do you have the empty cans? If you want, you can buy them from me at the rate of SR10 per can, which I'll fill for you for SR8 per gallon," he said. I haggled with him for a reduced rate but he refused saying that his price was final. I went to another man and he offered to fill it for SR7 per can. If one person could fill an average of 500 gallons per day at the price of SR8 per gallon, then they would make around SR4,000 a day.

Ali Hassan, a Saudi citizen, feels frustrated by the Zamzam mafia. "Last year the place was divided into two sections. One section was for individuals and the other section was for mosques and charity organizations," he said.

"The refilling process at the place was controlled by a private company. Each individual had the right to fill five gallons at one time. We used to pay SR1 per gallon. Now the whole place is under the total control of these unscrupulous overstayers," he said.

Majed Samir, a Saudi citizen, arrived at the place in the afternoon to fill two gallons of Zamzam water. He said that he tried to fill it himself but was not allowed by the Zamzam mafia. In the end he had no choice but to pay them SR16 per gallon.

"I agreed to pay under the condition that they would carry them to my car and they agreed. Shortly after that, the Passport Department raided the place and the mafia members ran away. After the Passport Department left, another foreigner came to me and told me that the man who offered to fill the cans for me was arrested," he said.

"This second man offered to fill my cans if I paid him SR7 per can. While he was filling my gallons I saw the first man walk in. I realized then that these people even con each other. I decided to leave and not to create a big scene because it wasn't any use in the absence of the police," he added.

Nizar Suwaileh said that what was happening inside the Zamzam station was a joke. He wondered how foreigners had managed to take control and why the police were not addressing the issue. "The government built this place to help people get Zamzam water without any hassle. Instead we're insulted and pushed around by these people," he added.

Ayed Al-Luqmani, head of the Passport Department in Makkah, said that the department is conducting daily raids to arrest overstayers and has managed to arrest several violators