



The Metropolitan Police Service targets Hajj fraud as pilgrims prepare for their 2012 trip to Makkah

The Muslim community is being warned to watch out for fraudsters who steal hundreds of thousands of pounds from pilgrims travelling to Mecca.

With just under three months to go until this year's Hajj [24 - 29 October], The Metropolitan Police Service [MPS] is working alongside the Muslim community and the National Fraud Intelligence Bureau, operated by City of London Police, to raise awareness, as there are concerns pilgrims may be tempted by last minute deals from illegitimate travel operators promising Hajj visa packages.

The criminals pose as legitimate travel operators, often offering discounts of up to 50 per cent on the normal travel price, but shortly before the departure the tour operator closes, leaving the victim with no tour and no prospect of a refund.

Despite work to raise awareness of the crime and encourage reporting, The Council of British Hajjis [CBHUK] estimates that some 300 people contacted their organisation in 2011 to say they believed they had been a victim of Hajj fraud, yet only one per cent reported the crime to police.

There are a number of things people can do to avoid falling victim to Hajj fraud:

Make sure your travel agent/tour operator is ATOL (Air Travel Organisers' Licensing) protected

Check that your travel agent/tour operator is accredited by the Saudi Embassy

Check exactly what you are paying for

Get everything in writing.

MPS Deputy Assistant Commissioner, Steve Kavanagh, who is also chair of The London Muslim Communities Forum, said:

"Hajj fraud is a particularly cruel crime which robs people of the means to make what could have been their once in a lifetime trip to Mecca.

"The Metropolitan Police works closely with the National Fraud Intelligence Bureau in the fight against fraud and we urge anyone who believes they have been a victim of Hajj fraud to contact Action Fraud or their local police force.

"By working together with the Muslim Community to raise awareness of Hajj fraud, we can stop the criminals who cause so much misery and help to protect those planning to make their own pilgrimage in 2012. "

Wahid Zaman, 27, from Tower Hamlets was a victim of Hajj Fraud in 2008, losing £10,000 on a planned trip to Mecca with his family.

He was one of 300 unsuspecting Muslims who were defrauded out of more than half a million pounds by a travel agent who took their cash and passports, before disappearing, leaving clients desperately trying to make alternative arrangements for their pilgrimage

The agent was investigated by officers from Tower Hamlets CID, who were contacted by victims. Following a comprehensive inquiry, the agent was subsequently convicted and jailed in 2009 and many victims, including Mr Zaman, were financially compensated.

Mr Zaman said: "Hajj is a journey of a lifetime. My family and I were fulfilling a dream and were so much looking forward to it.

"I booked the trip with a company recommended to me. I sat down with the agent - who I was told had been in the travel industry for a while. I didn't feel there was any need to question him, so I didn't second guess his opinion and I put my trust in him.

"The agent asked for payment in the first week of October 2008 and we were due to fly out for Hajj in the November. I paid him £10,000 in advance, on the assumption that he would get the tickets and visas - and that meant we handed over our passports.

"During the middle of October I started to call him for confirmation of the tickets and passports. When there was no reply, I realised he had left the country. "My family and I were devastated. The situation was very stressful and upsetting.

"I was determined to address the situation and I contacted the police, who took my case very seriously. An investigation was carried out and the agent was convicted. I was also able to recuperate some of the money back.

"I urge anyone who is planning to book their trip to Hajj to be aware, stay vigilant and check everything. A recommendation from a friend or family member does not guarantee the agent is authentic.

"When booking your trip, double check your travel agent is registered with ATOL. Do not hand over money unless you are one hundred per cent sure that it is the right course of action, and do not give up your passport without checking.

"A lot of Hajj fraud victims do not realise that help is at hand. I urge anyone who has been a victim of Hajj fraud to have the confidence to report it to the police. They are there to help and take Hajj fraud very seriously, as my case demonstrates.

"Despite what happened to me and my family - we completed our pilgrimage that same year. We were absolutely determined. "

Anyone who believes they have been a victim of Hajj fraud should report to their local police or to Action Fraud, the UK's national fraud and internet crime reporting centre. Action Fraud has a facility to help individuals whose first language is not English.

The National Fraud Intelligence Bureau [NFIB] can use this information to quickly pinpoint where fraudsters are operating, and help police bring them to justice.

Detective Superintendent Dave Clark, Director of the National Fraud Intelligence Bureau, said: "I would encourage pilgrims to be vigilant when arranging their trip and follow the advice given.

"It is essential that victims and people who may be aware of this type of crime report it to police or Action Fraud. Under-reporting of this type of crime, allows fraudsters to continue to target members of the Muslim community.

"Hajj fraudsters operate very quickly and so time is of the essence when reporting frauds. Hajj frauds can be reported in a number of languages via Action Fraud".

Rashid Mogradia, CEO of the British Council of Hajjis (CBHUK), a charity which works for the welfare of British pilgrims, said: "Hajj is a journey of faith. For many this will be a memorable and positive life changing experience.

"For total peace of mind, we advise anyone booking a pilgrimage package to do so with reputable and authorised tour operators who hold a valid Air Travel Organisers Licence (ATOL) and are approved by the Saudi Ministry of Hajj.

"However, each year there are some who may fall foul to Hajj fraud. If you believe you have fallen victim to this type of crime, report it to the police and Action Fraud."

People who think they have been a victim of Hajj fraud should call their local police or: Action Fraud on 0300 123 2040 or OFT Consumer Direct on 08454040506.

General information and advice for Hajj pilgrims is available from:

www.actionfraud.police.uk/

www.fco.gov.uk/en/travel-and-living-abroad/your-trip/hajj-pilgrims

www.the-cbh.org.uk

www.met.police.uk/fraudalert

www.cityoflondon.police.uk