

Indonesia joins Iran in slamming Saudi Arabia over haj tragedy

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Jakarta: Indonesia criticized Saudi Arabia on Tuesday for its slow response to the haj pilgrimage disaster in Mina, saying its diplomats only received full access to the dead and injured days after the crush.

The criticism from Indonesia, the Muslim world's most populous country, comes as its officials, as well as those in India and Pakistan, say that Saudi officials gave foreign diplomats some 1,100 pictures of those killed in last week's disaster.

The Saudi health ministry's latest figures, released Saturday, put the toll at 769 people killed and 934 injured in the stampede.

Saudi officials are yet to comment on the discrepancy in the toll as countries around the world struggle to identify their dead.

Authorities in the kingdom only granted Indonesian diplomats full access to the dead last night, including forensic records like fingerprints, said Lalu Muhammad Iqbal, an official in Indonesia's foreign ministry.

He said 46 Indonesian pilgrims died in the Mina crush, while 10 were injured and 90 remain missing.

Lukman Hakim Saifudin, Indonesia's religious affairs minister, said in a statement Monday that Indonesians did not have free access to hospitals to search for injured Indonesians.

"The Saudi Arabian government has its own regulation, tradition, culture and procedures in dealing with such cases," Saifuddin said from Mecca. "This has not allowed us enough freedom in our effort to identify" the victims.

Saudi authorities have said that the disaster began when two large waves of pilgrims converged on a narrow road last Thursday during the final days of the annual haj in Mina near the holy city of Mecca.

Survivors say the crowding caused people to suffocate and eventually trample one another in the worst disaster to befall the annual pilgrimage in a quarter-century.

Iran, Saudi Arabia's regional Shiite archrival, has criticized the Sunni kingdom over the haj disaster and daily protests have taken place near the Saudi Embassy in Tehran.

Iranian state media also have suggested that the death toll in the disaster was far higher, without providing any corroboration.

- AP