

Shrine Board reviews ongoing Amarnathji Yatra; satisfied about Yatra management

SRINAGAR, JULY 24 – The Shri Amarnathji Shrine Board met here today under the chairmanship of Governor N.N. Vohra, who is also the Chairman of the Board. The meeting reviewed the ongoing Yatra and expressed satisfaction over the strenuous efforts made under the Governor's sustained direction for ensuring satisfactory management of the pilgrimage despite serious constraints arising from the heavy snowfalls in the preceding winter and bad weather for several weeks before the commencement of the current Yatra which commenced on 25th June 2012.

The Board Members, H.H. Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, Pt. Bhajan Sopori, Mr. Justice (Retd) G.D. Sharma, Dr. (Prof) Ved Kumari Ghai, Ms. Sunita Narain and Mr. Vijay Dhar had visited the Holy Cave Shrine early today morning alongwith Shri Navin K. Choudhary, Chief Executive Officer of the Board, to pay obeisance and to inspect the arrangements made for the Yatris. The Board Members interacted with the Yatris and particularly met the Doctors running the Medical Aid Centres (MACs) to review, first hand, the obtaining arrangements for providing suitable treatment to the Yatris.

The Board meeting, attended by the CEO and the Additional CEO, Shri Preet Pal Singh, expressed satisfaction over the enlargement of the network for the Registration of pilgrims by bringing in 102 Post Offices, located in 8 States, to provide registration facilities and, in this process, enhancing the number of Registration outlets to 276, against 149 during 2011. It was noted that registration is also done through internet based e-registration facility on J&K Bank's website. The Board was informed that 4,07,815 pilgrims had secured Registration upto 22nd July 2012 as against 2,59,897 Yatris during the entire Yatra 2011 in which 6.35 lakh pilgrims had paid obeisance at the Shrine. The Board was further informed that as against 99,315 pilgrims who had secured On-Spot Registration during Yatra 2011 as many as 93,902 had secured On-Spot Registration up to 22nd July 2012 in the ongoing Yatra. It was recognised that unlike during 2011 the On-Spot Registration during the current Yatra is being done after the pilgrim furnishes a Health Certificate.

After detailed discussion the Board observed that while the Registration process had gained considerable headway and a significantly higher percentage of the pilgrims were arriving only after procuring Registration based on Health Certificates, further efforts would require to be made to ensure that 100% pilgrims arrive after procuring Registration based on valid Health Certificates in future Yatras.

As regards the casualties suffered by pilgrims within the Yatra area, the CEO reported that, on the basis of statistics being maintained by the Shrine Board, as upto 23rd July evening 90 pilgrims had lost their lives, 84 due to medical reasons and 6 on account of accidents within the Yatra area. Besides, 22 pilgrims had lost their lives outside the Yatra area, of whom 18 were killed in serious accidents.

CEO further informed that of the 90 pilgrims who had lost their lives till last evening, 45 casualties had taken place on the Pahalgam-Chandanwari-Sheshnag route, 33 on the Baltal route and 12 pilgrims had passed away after admission to hospitals in Srinagar. The Board also noted that of the 90 casualties, 49 pilgrims

belong to Punjab, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh and, further, the deceased comprise 69 males and 21 females, of varying age groups.

The Board was informed that consequent to the directions of the Hon'ble Supreme Court of India in a recent Suo Motu proceeding, the Governor, as Chairman Shrine Board, had nominated Ms Sunita Narain, Director General, Centre for Science and Environment, New Delhi and Shri Navin K. Choudhary, CEO, to represent the Shrine Board on the Special High Powered Committee (SHPC) established under the Supreme Court's Order. Ms Narain will advise the SHPC on Environmental issues.

The Board expressed grave concern and deep regret over Yatris losing their lives and desired the CEO to prepare a detailed critical report on the various contributory causes where after, as necessary, the Board may convene a Special Meeting to discuss this matter in full detail. The Board observed that while all necessary steps must be taken to ensure against loss of life in the coming years it is imperative to reckon the harsh climatic conditions of the high Himalayan altitudes through which the pilgrims have to trek. In this context the Board observed that the implications of early commencement of the Yatra would have to be seriously revisited.

The Board expressed satisfaction on being informed about the upgradation and enlargement of facilities available at the Medical Aid Centres (MACs) set up by the State Health Department consequent to the recommendations of the High Level Committee (HLC) set up by the State Government consequent to a meeting held in October 2011 between the Governor and the Chief Minister and concerned Cabinet Ministers. It was stated that of the total of 89 MACs 61 had been set up by State Health Department, 22 by the Army and CPOs and 6 by the NGOs, and that up to 20th July 3,42,752 pilgrims had received treatment at these Centres.

The Board Members, all of whom had visited the Shrine today morning and held discussions with Doctors incharge of the various MACs, observed that they had been informed that several pilgrims who had lost their lives were already suffering from serious medical ailments and should never have ventured to embark on the Yatra. The Board Members were also informed by the Doctors that, considering the number of Yatris who had lost their lives, there were serious doubts about the validity of the Health Certificates on the basis of which the pilgrims had secured Yatra Permits.

The Board observed that more vigorous measures may require to be enforced to prevent the loss of pilgrims' lives and that the CEO should initiate action to have short documentaries prepared in various languages for being shown several months in advance of the Yatra, to better educate the potential pilgrims.

The Board expressed satisfaction over the measures taken to ensure progressive improvement in sanitation and maintaining of cleanliness at all Camp locations and along the tracks. In this context, Chairman requested Ms. Sunita Narain to pay an early visit to the Yatra area, before the conclusion of the ongoing pilgrimage to review the sewage treatment at first hand and advise regarding further improvement. Ms Narain agreed to visit the Yatra area within the next week.

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