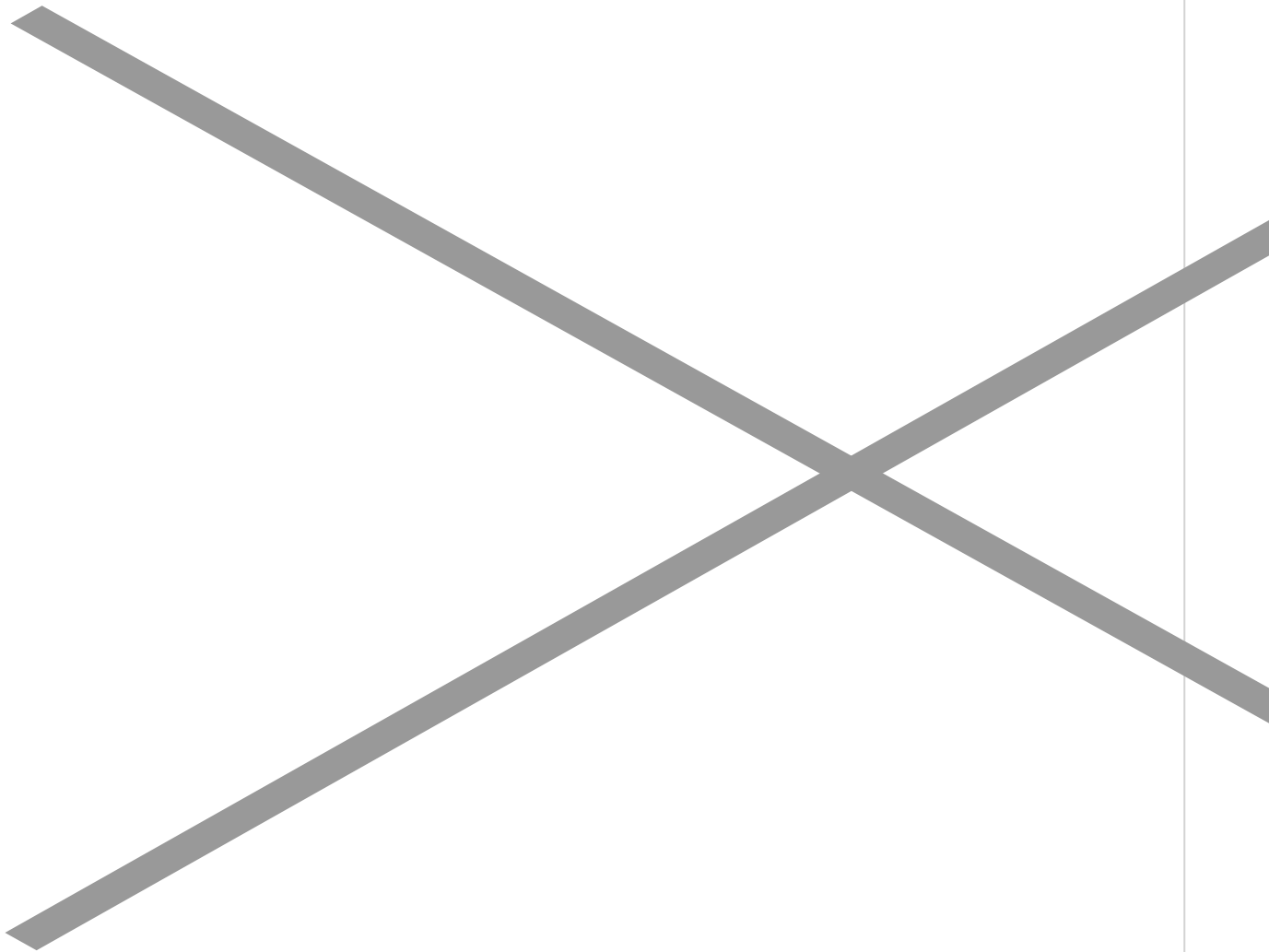


Muslim pilgrims gather at Mount Arafat, Saudi Arabia, as the haj reaches its peak

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Mount Arafat, Saudi Arabia (RHC)-- Following in the footsteps of prophets under a scorching sun, more than 1.83 million Muslims from around the world gathered Saturday on a sacred hill in Saudi Arabia to worship and reflect amid of suffocating heat.

The ritual on Mount Arafat, known as the Mountain of Mercy, is considered the summit of the haj pilgrimage. It is usually the most memorable for pilgrims, who stay together asking God for mercy, blessings, prosperity and good health. The hill is about 20 kilometers (12 miles) southeast of Mecca.

Thousands of pilgrims walk in the pre-dawn darkness. On the slopes of the rocky hill and its surroundings, many raised their hands in worship with tears streaming down their faces.

"It is certainly something great. It is the best day of the year for Muslims, and the best feeling anyone can experience," said Hussein Mohammed, an Egyptian pilgrim, as he stood on the slopes at dawn. "It's the best place for anyone hoping to be (here) on this day and time."

The Prophet Muhammad is believed to have delivered his last speech, known as the Farewell Sermon, on Mount Arafat 1,435 years ago. In the sermon, the prophet called for equality and unity among Muslims.

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