

Pakistan Visas Stampede; Solutions to Streamline the Process

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Security Authorities of Nangarhar province have confirmed that a stampede to secure Pakistan visas in Footfall stadium on 21st October, 2020 left at least 11 women killed and 12 injured. Nangarhar Regional Hospital's administration has also confirmed transfer of dead bodies to the hospital. Among the wounded, three individuals were men. Pakistani consulate at Jalalabad has corroborated the incident and has said that the incident has occurred 5 Kilometers distant from the consulate and was a result of poor management of crowd.

Thousands of people gathers in the stadium every day to process their documents for Pakistani visa. The Visa issuance process was halted on 16th March, 2020 due to the Coronavirus outbreak. The process was later resumed on 11th October, 2020 in Kabul and Jalalabad. According to a proclamation of the provincial Council of Nangarhar province, the incident occurred when more than 3 thousand people rushed into the stadium to secure Pakistani visa. Afghan citizens mostly apply for the visa for visiting their relatives, treatment of patients and pursuing higher education in Pakistan.

Embassy of Pakistan has proclaimed that they will commence better facilitation of visa services in Kabul, Nangarhar, Kandahar, Herat and Mazar-e-Shareef.

Previously, Only Pakistani embassy in Kabul used to issue visas exclusively to elderly, patients and businessmen.

Due to presence of widespread corruption in visa issuance, the first basic stage of the process was being carried out by social activists in the stadium since a few

days. However, the horrifying incident occurred due to awfully poor management of crowd.

Heavy Demand Amid Limited Capacity

Pakistan has four consulates, i.e., in Jalalabad, Mazar-e-Shareef, Kandahar and Herat, which offers visa services in addition to the embassy. Pakistani embassy has the right to accept or reject visa applications without providing any reason. The visa services are categorized into revisit, treatment, education, business and working permits.

Thousands of people recourses towards the Pakistani embassy to apply for visa. Most of the applicants seek visa for treatment and many other problems. Patients who cannot be treated within the country or do not trust the quality of local health services applies for Pakistani visa. Most applicants strive to travel to Pakistan because they cannot afford to travel to any other foreign country. They are therefore constrained to endure difficulties so that they can secure Pakistani visa and access comparatively economical health services in Pakistan.

Many applicants have complained about poor application process of visa issuance via TV and radio interviews. They complain about individuals who receives bribe in order to hastened the visa issuance process. Applicants say that unless brokers and commissioner are eliminated and visa services are submitted to a private organization, the problems will persist. Among the applicants, some endure 8 to 10 days of difficulties in order to attain the visa.

Before 2018, Pakistani embassy used to issue 700 visas every day. But currently, the embassy and its consulates issue more than 1000 visas every day. The visa issuance has always been expanded, restricted or halted according to political ties between both countries, which has always created numerous problems for officials and the people. According to Ahmad Saedi, Former diplomat of Afghanistan in Pakistan has said that Pakistan knows constraints of the people of Afghanistan and therefore uses visa restrictions as a political deterrent in order to downbeat the government.

The Pakistani embassy has expressed condolences about the horrifying incident of Jalalabad. Mansoor Ahmad Khan, special envoy of Pakistan for Afghanistan has expressed that they are engaged with Afghan authorities for better facilitation of vis applicants. He has added “We are committed to continue visa issuance to Afghan nationals under new visa policy while making the process smoother and streamlined at our end”. During Abdullah Abdullah’s visit to Pakistan, cabinet of

the government of Pakistan sanctioned a new strategy which will allow 1 year visit visas and educational visas according to the study duration. In addition, the new policy has permitted issuance of on-the-border visa issuance. Witnesses have expressed that Pakistani embassy issues visit visas, but provision of other new visa facilities are still indefinite.

Is There Any Solution to Visa Application Problems?

Although some problems of applicants will be resolved with the new policy of Pakistan, but the fundamental problems are related to the Afghan government and the people of Afghanistan which will not be eliminated even with the betterment of the process. The main causes of travels to Pakistan are poverty, unemployment, and medical treatment. If we had fully equipped hospitals, medical specialists and modern medical equipment within the country, people would not have to travel abroad for medical treatment.

In addition, the Afghan government is responsible to prevent youngsters from traveling abroad for work by provide career opportunities within the country. The people also has responsibility to understand that traveling abroad for minor diseases is not necessary. However, a key problem of peace and security still stands. If the peace process is not accelerated and a lasting peace does not occur, the people of Afghanistan will always be indigent for other's help.

Nevertheless, it is possible to efficiently manage visa issuance process and reduce the problems to minimal. But to do so, the embassy of Pakistan, ministry of interiors, and applicants should recognize and perform their duties.

Recommendations:

1. As the Pakistani embassy and its four consulates are directly responsible to manage and issue visas, it is time for the embassy to establish a new system considering the problems of applicants, so that any further disgrace is avoided. Dissatisfaction of visa applicants can directly affect the relations of both countries. As the peace negotiations are in progress, both countries are required to have friendly relations.
2. Increment in visa duration is another solution for reducing visa problems which has recently been commenced by the Pakistani embassy. In addition, insertion of an external organization to manage visa issuance process can tremendously improve the services. Inclusion of Such agencies had positive effect on visa issuance processes of Turkish and Indian embassies, which, in return for a certain fee, can efficiently manage the process and gatherings.
3. Until external organization starts operations or any other solutions are

offered, the Pakistani embassy can commence online application services for the first stages of the process. Via online service, applicant can fill required form and submit it along with scan copies of passport and other required documents. After submitting online application, the embassy can then categorize applications according to priorities, specify dates and inform them about their appointment. This can maintain order, evade stampedes and avoid wasting time.

4. In order to preserve reputation of Afghanistan and eliminate problems of the citizens, ministry of interiors should prevent interferences of brokers and commissioners in the visa issuance process. In cooperation with the embassy of Pakistan, the ministry can grant visa issuance services to a reliable Afghan or Pak-Afghan diverse organization in order to resolve the current problems.
5. Applicants of Pakistani visa should be categorized and prioritized as the following:
 - Patients who cannot attain medical treatment within the country.
 - Students of various universities of Pakistan.
 - Businessmen and traders who travel to Pakistan for business purposes.
 - Those who want to visit Pakistan in order to meet their relatives or for leisure purposes.

The first three categories may not encompass even one third of the total applicants of Pakistan visas. Regrettably, most of the applicants are related to the third category. Considering the Jalalabad tragedy, Afghan people are expected to understand priorities and avoid unnecessary gathering at consulates and the embassy.

Hopefully, the recent tragedy of Jalalabad to become a lesson for all stakeholders to work together to eliminate the visa problems which are continuously troubling Afghan applicants for one and a half decade.

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HEKMATYAR'S VISIT TO PAKISTAN



Lately, Afghan politicians have increased their visits to Pakistan after being officially invited by the country. On 18th October, 2020, Prime Minister Imran Khan invited Gulbudin Hekmatyar to have 3-day trip to his Pakistan. Three weeks ago, Abdullah Abdullah, Chairman of the high Council of National Reconciliation also had an official visit to Pakistan. Before inviting Political figures of Afghanistan, Pakistan invited officials of the Qatar office of the Taliban. Subsequently, Mullah Abdul Ghani Beradar and other delegates visited Islamabad on 24th August, 2020. And even before that, Mohammad Muhaqiq and other political figures had visits to Islamabad after being officially invited by the country.

Here, we analyze the causes of increase in Afghan politicians' visits to Pakistan and its effects on the Afghan peace.

Hekmatyar's Visit to Pakistan; A Brief Assessment

According to Pakistani ambassador Mansoor Khan, Pakistan has chosen the policy of having constructive diplomatic relations with the Afghan government and Afghan politicians so that the intra-Afghan dialogue can succeed. In this regard, the government of Pakistan firstly invited Mulla Abdul Ghani Berader to visit Islamabad. Later, Abdullah Abdullah, Chairman of the High Council of National Reconciliation was officially invited to visit the country. Although a remarkable

progress has not been witnessed in intra-Afghan dialogue, but Pakistan has promised the Afghan Taliban and Afghan government officials of their extensive support in bringing peace, expansion of trade relations and improvement in political ties.

Gulbadin Hekmatyar had close relations with Pakistan during the holy war against the Soviet Union back in Late 20th Century. However, his links with the country weakened and he fled to Iran during the Taliban's administration. After the US invasion in December, 2001, He left Iran and started holy war against the US. During the Unity government in 2016, he signed a peace deal with the Afghan government and returned to Kabul after many years. On 18th October, 2020, he had a three-day visit to Pakistan, as he was officially invited by the country. During his visit, he met with Prime Minister Imran Khan, President Arif Alvi, Chairmen of the National Assembly and the senate, foreign minister Shah Mahmood Quraishi and some other political figures. Before his visit, ministry of foreign affairs of Pakistan proclaimed that ideas about the peace process will be exchanged and ways of strengthening relations between the people of both countries will be discussed with Hekmatyar.

Overall, visits of Afghan officials to Pakistan should be considered constructive. This is because such visits can not only strengthen political relations with the country, but accelerate the peace process. During his visit, Mr. Hekmatyar had a talk at (Institute of Policy Studies, Islamabad) IPS on Afghan Peace.

Hekmatyar visit to Pakistan was criticized because he gave harsh statements about the Afghan government, India and Iran and accused them of contradicting the peace process. Conversely, an ambassador of peace should use respectful language in order for the success of peace negotiations. However, If Afghan politicians keep backing one of the two opposing countries and make accusations against the other, it will have no advantages except its harms of making the peace process more complex and will create further obstacles for peace.

Successive Visits to Pakistan and their Effects on the Peace Process

Visits of Afghan politicians to Pakistan indicate that Pakistan strive to attain the support of the future government of Afghanistan. And therefore, Pakistani government strive to denote that it can have constructive with both the Taliban and Afghan politicians. After Hekmatyar's visit, Mir Rahman Rahmani Chairman of the Parliament was officially invited by Pakistan and visited the country along with 17 other delegates on 23rd October, 2020.

During the Pakistan-Afghanistan trade and investment forum 2020, Prime Minister Imran Khan expressed that there is a risk that India will strive to use the Afghan soil against Pakistan. Considering such statements, Pakistan may not be able to play role as expressed by Pakistani officials earlier. This might be because Pakistan has comparatively lesser influence over the Taliban. Therefore, by constructing relation with the Afghan government and politicians, Pakistan strive to pressure the Taliban and secure its interest after the success of the peace process.

On the other hand, Hekmatyar supports the idea of establishment of interim government. He believes that in order to enable ceasefire, establishment of interim government is necessary because the Taliban do not want to work with the current government. Meanwhile, the negotiating teams of the Taliban and the Afghan government are still discussing the structure of intra-Afghan dialogue which took one and a half month. Excluding the Afghan government, Hekmatyar strives to unite political parties and commence separate negotiations with the Taliban, although it seems impossible but even in case of success, presence of national consensus will still be questionable. During the previous presidential elections, some politicians suggested the idea of establishing an interim government, but faded after the elections.

Some countries in the region such as Iran and India which supports the current government in Afghanistan strive sustain the government to complete its duration. However, Pakistan does not favor continuity of the current government. On the other hand, struggles of the US and Pakistan regarding the Afghan peace

forced former president Hamid Karzai to give a statement about the peace process and said that any secret deals about peace is unacceptable for Afghans.

Currently, Afghan politicians should avoid giving any statement that turn the peace opportunity into the battleground of politics between India and Pakistan and harm the peace process.

Overall, visits of Afghan politicians to Pakistan and other neighboring countries can improve mutual cooperation and hasten the peace process. But to do so, regional competitions should be considered and securing national interests of Afghanistan and brining peace should be the main objective of all politicians.

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