

# Big test for PM Imran

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ISLAMABAD: Pakistan has come a long way to take some concrete measures to combat 'money-laundering' and contain terror financing. Its efforts certainly paid off as FATF in its recent meeting in Australia appreciated the steps taken by Pakistan.

Now it is time for the government of Prime Minister Imran Khan to take some decisive action on 'human trafficking', which in the past had caused lot of embarrassment as some 'terrorists' were found travelling from Pakistani airports on fake documents.

Today, the Islamabad airport considered as 'hub' of such activities and a high-profile investigation conducted by four members of the FIA team has now confirmed the alleged involvement of some FIA officials as well as another intelligence agency, which comes under interior ministry in sending people abroad on fake travel documents including bogus Pakistani passports.

The prime minister, who also has the portfolio of interior ministry, now has to take a decisive decision on how to go about it. The file cannot be put under the carpet for one reason or the other as the matter is also in the knowledge of British authorities, who are quite sensitive on the issue as they were the one who had first pointed out to Pakistan some four years ago and were repeatedly warning our agencies in this connection. Investigation revealed that the number of people who had travelled on fake travel documents from Islamabad airport alone has already crossed over 10,000.

FIA sources confirmed that the way people were travelling on 'fake documents' were facilitated by the FIA people at immigration counter till boarding was shocking. "We now have all evidence including CCTV footage," one of the sources said.

The most alarming part of this ongoing investigation is the dilemma which the FIA is facing today. It is the lead agency in combating human smuggling and has now claimed that it has collected enough evidence to arrest some of the officials but required PM's consent, keeping the high grade of at least one of the officers. Since there is a possibility that it may trigger a controversy between the two agencies, the premier's direction is required.

A reliable source revealed that a lobby within the PM House is trying to misguide the prime minister regarding the nature of probe and the alleged involvement of some senior officials.

PM's decision is also important as the British authorities were well aware of this huge scam as they were the ones who have been following this case since 2014, and the UK court had already convicted a Pakistani to four years prison. However, despite the UK's repeated requests to Pakistan to take solid measures to combat human trafficking, not much has been done though some people were arrested.

Therefore, at a time when Pakistan and the UK have signed a MoU for exchange of prisoners and closer cooperation to check financial crime like money-laundering, the human trafficking is one of the most sensitive issues for many countries including Britain.

Well-placed sources in the FIA confirmed that they were facing pressure not to pursue the probe further but said its team has already collected enough evidence to arrest all those involved but need consent as it involved some big names.

Sources said matter has already brought into the knowledge of the prime minister, and the file is before him to take the decision as the FIA seeks his consent before taking the final decision. Sources in the interior ministry said the matter is with the PM and also in knowledge of Minister of State for Interior Shehryar Khan Afridi. The decision to arrest one

of the 'key suspects, is expected soon. Investigation conducted into this massive racket had confirmed that from 2014 to 2018, some 10,600 Pakistanis and Afghans had travelled to the UK and Spain in particular on fake passports and fake visas.

It was in 2014 when for the first time British authorities alerted Pakistan regarding some people frequently travelling from PK-785, and later confirmed the arrest of one Pakistani and some Afghans, who also travelled on Pakistani passport.

Despite repeated warnings not much has been done till 2017, when the FIA constituted a four-member committee to probe the matter, which led to the arrest of some travel agents and human smugglers.

"It was at this stage we came to know the possible involvement of some FIA inspectors and officials in this racket," a senior FIA official told this scribe. Further investigation led to the disclosures of millions of rupees transferred in the accounts of these officials from the account of alleged human smugglers.

But the FIA was facing a dilemma as on the one hand it has also completed its investigation and on the other it feared that a powerful lobby is blocking further action and on the contrary trying to sideline officers who should have been given the credit for successful completion of the probe.

If those wanted by the FIA get promotion and those investigated the case penalised or transferred, it will raise question on claims of good governance. Therefore any further delay in taking the decisive decision on part of the prime minister could further hamper the investigation which may not only generate a new controversy in the country but will also give bad name to the government and malign Pakistan's image abroad.

Pakistan's recent efforts to combat 'money-laundering' has been appreciated at the FATF meeting in Australia, and the FIA team, which assisted the Pakistani delegation returned with some smile on their faces.

Human trafficking from Pakistan is nothing new and had increased since the days of first Afghan war in the 80s. At that time Karachi's Quaid-i-Azam International Airport was considered hub of all such activities. It was in the mid 80s when for the first time the US in a confidential report even named around five officials of two intelligence and investigative agencies whom they suspected were involved in it. In the post 9/11, the US and some other countries warned and issued alert for people travelling on 'fake passports' and travel documents.

Therefore, it is time that Pakistan has to come hard on 'human smugglers'. This is a big test for Prime Minister Imran Khan, who has been advocating that his government's strong resolve against combating people involved in 'money- laundering' and one heinous crime like human trafficking. It becomes far more serious if some 'officials' of the agencies were named suspects in the case. It is better to act now and avoid embarrassment before any country takes up the issue at the highest level.

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