

PM wants to avoid pricey hotels during his stay in Washington

WASHINGTON: Officials in Islamabad are believed to have informed the Pakistan embassy that Prime Minister Imran Khan desires to stay at the ambassador's official residence instead of an expensive hotel during his three-day visit to Washington, starting on July 21.

While staying at the ambassador's residence can considerably reduce the cost of the visit, a probe by Dawn revealed that neither the United States secret service nor the city administration appears "very receptive" to the idea.

The US secret service takes over the security of a visiting dignitary as soon as he or she lands in the US while the city administration has to ensure that the visit does not disrupt Washington's traffic. The US capital receives hundreds of presidents and prime ministers every year and the US federal government works jointly with the city administration to ensure that those visits do not disturb the city's normal life.

US secret service and the city's administration don't appear to be too receptive to the idea

The ambassador's residence is in the heart of Washington's diplomatic enclave, just off one of the city's main arteries, the Mass (Massachusetts Avenue). There are at least a dozen embassies in and around that area, including those of India, Turkey and Japan while another dozen embassies such as those of Brazil, Britain and South Africa are not far away.

A visiting government head also holds a number of meetings with US officials, lawmakers and media and think-tank representatives during his stay in Washington. Since the residence is not large enough for all these meetings, the prime minister will have to meet his guests at the Pakistan embassy, commuting through Washington's busy traffic during rush hours. To do so, his entourage will have to drive by most of these embassies as well as the US vice president's official residence.

Some immediate family members of President Trump also live between the two locations.

Any closure of the street on which the ambassador's residence is situated will prevent other residents, including several ambassadors, from travelling to and from their workplaces during the three-day stay of Mr Khan.

Besides, nobody will suggest closing the Mass as it will block traffic all the way to downtown, which houses hundreds of office buildings including the White House. It's these logistic and security issues that force visiting heads of states and governments to stay at one of half a dozen hotels that have special arrangement for such VVIPs.

The most popular among them is Willard Inter-continental, which is hardly a few hundred yards from the White House. Other hotels also used for this purpose are Four Seasons, Georgetown and Ritz Carlton, Washington DC. Those wanting to cut down expenses, also stay at Wardman Park Marriott, which is close to the Pakistan Embassy. Some embassies prefer this hotel because it's huge and can be used for hosting community events as well.

Each of these hotels has a VVIP section with separate elevators and exit and entry points. This makes it easy for the US secret service to protect the guest. But if the prime minister still wants to avoid a hotel, he can stay with one of the rich Pakistani-Americans in the DC suburbs.

Most of these houses have tall boundary walls and can be easily secured. Staying in a suburb, however, means travelling to Washington every morning and holding all the meetings at the Pakistan Embassy.

This, however, will be another headache for the US secret service. The Pakistani embassy borders the Israeli embassy and thus it's another top security zone.

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