

Pakistan opens doors to the world

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan on Thursday launched the online visa regime with the aim to promote tourism and investment.

Prime Minister Imran Khan performed the ceremony at the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) here. According to the PTI official Twitter account, the new e-visa scheme will facilitate visitors from 175 countries.

Launching the new system, the prime minister reminded that Pakistan had seen tough times in its efforts to combat terrorism but the situation was different today. He gave the credit to the security forces and intelligence agencies. Imran announced that the next season of the Pakistan Super League (PSL) will be held in its entirety in Pakistan.

"Pakistan is a secure country today. The launch of the visa portal is a big step. Today, I especially congratulate the interior ministry and Foreign Office. People don't realise that this is a very big change today." He quoted a Chinese proverb: "To take a 1000 mile journey you have to take the first step."

Imran said this was the first step to open up the country, the Naya (new) Pakistan. Pakistan always had a mindset: make it as difficult as you can to grant anyone visas. The prevailing thought seemed to have been: "It's better if they don't come."

He said in the 60s there was great self-confidence and self-belief that Pakistan was moving up in the world at a pace faster than others and the world too saw and recognised that fact.

Khan said Pakistan's image at that time could be assessed by the fact that President Ayub Khan during his state visit to the United States in 1961 was received at the airport by President John F. Kennedy.

He regretted that in the 70s a "socialist government" came and reversed the process of growth and development. He was of the view that unless a country had wealth generation, it could not progress.

"If someone seeks to invest in the country, they will do so when the country has wealth creation. If there is no wealth creation, then it is not as if someone will invest for charity. So our mindset changed in the 70s, whereby we thought of making money as a sin," he continued.

He said a politician at the time used to begin every speech by criticising investors, capitalists, and landlords. "The change in mindset is what will eventually bring about the change that the country needs. The change will be seen on the ground later, it first has to be present in our minds."

He highlighted how the mindset which saw profit making as a negative characteristic had harmed the country. "A country which had more industrial production than that of Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand, got left behind soon."

He said the new Pakistan was a confident Pakistan where there were no security issues. "Ask Sirajul Mulk how difficult the whole process was for foreigners to go to Chitral: obtaining No Objection Certificates (NOCs) and a whole host of other requirements," he said, gesturing towards the member of the Prime Minister's task force on tourism.

He said to encourage investment from abroad, the obvious first step was to ease the visa regime. "When people come here with ease only then will they be able to see the potential for investment in Pakistan," he added.

The prime minister said religious tourism was another major area that needed to be explored. He said religious sites of Buddhism, Sikhism, Hinduism and Sufism in the country could attract a large number of visitors from across the world.

Imran Khan said the ancient civilizations in the country will be introduced to the world. Peshawar is the oldest living city in human history and a historical part in the city developed with German cooperation will be opened for tourists soon, he added.

He said all the tourist sites and attractions will be properly advertised on a dedicated website. The prime minister said work was also in the offing to promote beach tourism in the country by taking advantage of unexplored long coastal belt of Pakistan.

Reminiscing about his college days, he recalled how his headmaster Geoffrey Langlands used to take the students for treks to never-before-seen places. He said when he used to tell others to go see them, his proposal was always met with reluctance.

"No Pakistani was ready to go with us," he said, adding that it was in fact his cricket friends from England who used to go with him and then would plead with him to arrange such visits again.

Praising the beauty of the northern areas, the prime minister said that they were twice the size of Switzerland and there were still scores of undiscovered areas left to explore, also citing a Forbes magazine feature discussing the same.

Prior to his speech, he distributed shields among the core team members who made the launch possible.

Among the recipients were Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi, State Interior Minister Shahryar Khan Afridi, Interior Secretary Azam Suleman Khan, Foreign Secretary Ms. Tehmina Janjua, and National Database and Registration Authority (Nadra) Chairman Usman Mobin Yousaf.

Earlier, Minister for Foreign Affairs Shah Mehmood Qureshi said the launch of online visa facility was a major step towards Naya Pakistan. He said the decision made under the chairmanship of prime minister was a reflection that Pakistan was opening its doors to the world.

The frustration faced by the nation in the past is now coming to an end, he said and added that the government was fulfilling the wishes of people of Pakistan on economic, defense, foreign and other fronts.

Earlier, highlighting major features of the new visa policy, Shahryar Khan Afridi said multiple visas to nationals of 96 countries will be granted within 24 hours of applying.

He said the citizens of 175 countries could apply for online visa while people from 50 countries will be granted visa on arrival.

He said initially the citizens of five countries including the UK, Turkey, Malaysia, the UAE and China will be granted online visas in the pilot project.

He said the foreign nationals of Indian origin will also be allowed to avail themselves of the visa facility on arrival for religious tourism. He said nationals of UAE, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain among others will be given multiple visas.

In a related development, Prime Minister Imran Khan has constituted the National Tourism Coordination Board (NTCB) with a view to promoting tourism and boosting coordination among the federating units.

A notification said in super-session of the Cabinet Division's notification of even number on March 12, 2019, the prime minister was pleased to constitute the National Tourism Coordination Board with Acting Chairman Syed Zulfiqar Abbas Bukhari till appointment of a regular incumbent.

Chairman Board of Investment, secretary Inter-Provincial Coordination will be its members in addition to six representatives from the four provinces.

Moreover, chairman Pakistan Association of Tour Operators, chairman Travel Agents Association, and chairman Pakistan Hotel Association will be its members. The notification says nine members from the private sector will also be the board members, whereas joint secretary Cabinet Division will be secretary to the board, while five members from the ministries concerned will also be its part.

As many as 10 terms of reference (ToRs) of NTCB have also been thrashed out and made part of the notification. The board has been placed under the Cabinet Division and PTDC shall serve as secretariat and implementation body of NTCB.

Our Correspondent