

**Senate rejects move to relocate PIA head office**

ISLAMABAD: The Senate on Monday by a majority vote adopted a resolution opposing the government move to relocate the national flag-carrier head office from Karachi to Islamabad.

Minister for Aviation Ghulam Sarwar Khan, who initially said there was no such plan, opposed the resolution calling for retention of Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) headquarters in Karachi.

Speaking on the floor of the House, PPP parliamentary leader Sherry Rehman, who along with dozens of other opposition members moved the resolution, wondered as to why the government was opposing the resolution if it did not have any such plan to shift the PIA headquarters. "There's a general view that the government is trying to centralise every service, authority, and just about any activity or resource to Islamabad," she said.

She said the federal minister denied the move and in the same breath talked about the problems PIA representatives faced in attending parliamentary committee meetings. "Has this not always been the case? The government should give a definitive statement about motives behind the move. Lastly, why is this entire process being kept so secretive? It is unfortunate that we are forced to ask this question."

She recalled that a couple of days ago issues surrounding the move were raised in the aviation committee, headed by Senator Mushahidullah Khan, to have some semblance of clarity as to what exactly was going on. However, the minister was absent for a third time to clarify the position, she regretted.

Criticising the PTI government for allegedly attempting to centralise every service or authority in Karachi as it did not hold sway over Sindh, the PPP senator said PIA's headquarters had always been based in Karachi. She said the Jinnah International Airport happened to be Pakistan's biggest airport and would remain so. "Let me tell you, the traffic in Islamabad has not increased to the extent that it has in Karachi. This is because Karachi is the commercial hub of Pakistan. There are various examples to support that airline headquarters are based in the country's commercial hub," she reasoned.

**'Officials being moved'**

Speaking on the questionable reallocation of crew and officials, she said: "I have also received a letter stating that around 40 to 70 officials, including crew members, pilots and officials, were informed overnight they would be shifted to Islamabad without proper notice being served in advance, without being facilitated in terms of their accommodation and allowances, and without prior discussions with the Collective Bargaining Agent (CBA). This does not happen anywhere else in the world. Why is the government moving 70 officials overnight?"

"This shows that there is a hidden agenda. If the government has a justification for any of this, now is the time to voice it. The government is crippling Pakistan's commercial hub because it lacks political control there. It is taking Karachi's flights and re-routing them to Islamabad, it is trying to strip Karachi of its commercial base, of its roots, of its power to hold PIA in a commercial centre and you are telling us with your one-unit behaviour that this is not happening? It has marginalised the CBA role and is trying to choke the unions by imposing the Essential Services Act. It should explain on what pretext it has decided to do so."

Iftikhar A. Khan