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### **Strategy finalised to remove businessmen's concerns: PM**

ISLAMABAD: In separate meetings with business barons on Thursday, Prime Minister Imran Khan assured them that a strategy had been finalised to address the concerns of the business community regarding the National Accountability Bureau (NAB).

Prime Minister Khan chaired two meetings: one with the representatives of different chambers of commerce and industry, and the other with leading businessmen of the country. During one meeting, the prime minister told the businessmen that the government had decided to form a committee comprising senior persons of the industry. The committee will have the mandate to decide which cases regarding businessmen should be taken up by NAB and which should not.

A source at the Prime Minister Office said that NAB would be bound to first refer complaints against businessmen and industrialists/investors to the committee, which would decide which case should be investigated by the NAB and which should not. The prime minister was quoted as saying: "A strategy has been prepared to remove the business community's reservations about NAB."

Prime Minister Khan's remarks come amid concerns that NAB's investigations are having an impact on business activity.

In meetings with business leaders, Imran tries to address reservations about NAB

During the tenure of the last PML-N government as well, some business tycoons and industrialists had met the prime minister of the time, Mian Nawaz Sharif, as well as former president Mamnoon Hussain, in order to lodge a similar complaint about what they called NAB's "maltreatment", which was badly affecting the investment climate in the country.

In August this year, the federal cabinet decided to make some procedural changes in NAB's operations in order to provide a free of fear environment in which business activities and investment could operate so that the slowing economy might be revived.

On the other hand, in view of increasing criticism and complaints coming from businessmen and local investors against NAB, the anti-graft watchdog has established a separate cell for the registration of the complaints of business community.

Addressing traders and manufacturers in Lahore yesterday, NAB Chairman Javed Iqbal reassured them that the watchdog was acting on their complaints and would not be a cause for disruption in their businesses.

Meanwhile, in his meeting with representatives of the chambers of commerce and industry, the premier said that Pakistan's development was linked to the economy and added that the government was committed to providing "all possible facilities" to the business community

for profitable business activities. The Prime Minister's Adviser on Finance Dr Abdul Hafeez Shaikh, Adviser to the PM on Commerce, Textiles, Industries and Production and Investment Abdul Razak Dawood, and Board of Investment Chairman Zubair Gillani, as well as others, also participated in the meeting.

Bureaucracy also complains against NAB

Inside sources at the Prime Minister's Office told Dawn that some senior bureaucrats have lodged complaints with Prime Minister Khan against what they called "harassment" and what they perceive as the "threatening" attitude of NAB, resulting in government officials being reluctant to sign official files.

On the complaints of senior bureaucrats, the government is making all-out efforts to rein in the anti-corruption watchdog and provide a better working environment to the bureaucracy and business community, with the aim of ensuring 'ease of doing business'. In this connection, reportedly, the government has recently introduced a bill in the Senate to curtail NAB's powers.

A senior government official told Dawn that the prime minister took the initiative against NAB after a senior bureaucrat, during a meeting of the federal cabinet, refused to sign a file of a much-awaited rail project called Main Line-1 (ML-1) – the laying down of a new railway line from Karachi to Peshawar – that was to be launched under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) through Chinese funding a couple of months ago.

The ML-1 is perceived as the 'lifeline' of the country's economy and railways. Although the establishment of a high-speed rail link between Pakistan and China is already on the agenda, the laying down a modern 1,872 kilometre ML-1 was the challenge to be addressed immediately. The original plan was the construction and up-grading of the rail infrastructure between Peshawar and Karachi in two phases, due to be completed by 2022. The decision to split the project into two phases was made by the previous government due to the high cost and extensive work of this project, as it requires the refurbishment and expansion of the main railway line. The project's initial cost of \$8.2 billion was based on a joint feasibility study.

Meanwhile, senior lawyer and PTI leader Dr Babar Awan also met the prime minister and discussed certain legal affairs. This was Mr Awan's third meeting with the PM in the recent past.