Pakistan seeks more trade with central asia in diversity push

Pakistan is looking to intensify trade with neighbor Afghanistan and countries in Central Asia, as it looks to diversify commerce beyond the top players, the nation's trade adviser said.

The South Asian nation is looking to finalize a new trade accord with Kabul by June, Abdul Razak Dawood, the commerce adviser to Prime Minister Imran Khan, said in an interview in Islamabad. It plans to grow trade with five landlocked Central Asian nations -- Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan -- to about $1.5 billion a year from less than a billion in the past decade, he said.

"We're too restricted to a few countries -- North America, European Union and China," said Dawood. "But there is a much bigger world."

The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan promises a return of stability and provides an opportunity to Pakistan to strengthen commerce with its neighbor, which sits at the cross-roads of South and Central Asia.

Also, Islamabad stands to benefit from greater trade with Central Asian markets that are rich in energy resources needed to feed its ambition to grow its industrial base.

Pakistan is due to sign transit and preferential trade agreement with Uzbekistan in July, Dawood said.

The South Asian economy's move to scout for newer markets stems from the need to diversify its trade basket that's heavily reliant on the U.S., EU and China. Of its total $66 billion of annual trade in the year ended June 2020, China accounted for $11.2 billion and North America $6.76 billion, according to data from State Bank of Pakistan.

Analysts see the new push in the context of Pakistan's geo-strategic framework, which draws from the economic cooperation espoused by Chinese President Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative.

While China has channeled investments toward electricity generation in Pakistan as part of its Belt and Road Initiative, it's financing has also been focused on gas- and oil-based projects for exploration and distribution in Central Asia.

"Economy is one part of the strategic outlook," Vaqar Ahmed, joint executive director at Sustainable Development Policy Institute said. "Ultimately you would need economy, trade and investment cooperation to keep excitement in your strategic interests."

Bangladesh condemns attack on Muslims at Al-Aqsa Mosque

Bangladesh's top diplomat expressed concerns Saturday for attacks on Muslim worshippers at Al-Aqsa Mosque by Israeli police in Jerusalem and condemned the violation during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan.

AK Abdul Momen said he wanted a peaceful environment for worshippers at the sacred place.

"The violence that took place at Al Aqsa mosque on Friday is a matter of great sadness. We do condemn this type of violence," he told Anadolu Agency.

Israeli police attacked Muslim worshippers inside the Al-Aqsa Mosque, leaving nearly 53 Palestinians injured in clashes inside the Haram al-Sharif area, the Palestinian Red Crescent said in a statement.

The number of injuries rose to 285 in Israeli attacks at Al-Aqsa Mosque, Damascus Gate of Old City, and Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood, it said.

The violation was "unacceptable," said Momen. "This type of violence is never acceptable. We expect all should restrain so that such incident never happens in any part of the [occupied] Palestinian land."

He pointed to the sacred value of the Al-Aqsa Mosque and said holy places should be for worshipping and not fighting.

The mosque is the world's third-holiest site for Muslims. Jews call the area the "Temple Mount," claiming it was the site of two Jewish temples in ancient times.

Israel occupied East Jerusalem, where Al-Aqsa is located, during the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. It annexed the entire city in 1980 in a move never recognized by the international community.

"We believe in the two-state solution to the Middle East crisis -- state of Israel and state of Palestine side by side," said Momen as he underlined Bangladesh's stance on the situation,

But he added, however, that Bangladesh, one of the countries that have yet to make diplomatic ties with Israel, in principle believes that "Jerusalem is the capital of Palestine."

The envoy also condemned the violation in the month of Ramadan, especially on the eve of Layt-al-Qadr, or the Night of Power, the most sacred and holiest night in Ramadan.

According to media reports and previous records, Israel continued its intervention at regular intervals against Muslims at the mosque, while worshippers continued to perform tarawih -- special nightly prayers during Ramadan.

Referring to the long history of indemnity to the Israeli occupation forces, a professor of International Relations at Dhaka University, Imtiaz Ahmed, told Anadolu Agency that Israel does not feel minimal hesitation in conducting violations against Palestinians.

"Israel knows very well that the Muslim Arab world is divided and they will do nothing against them," said Ahmed.

Several Arab countries seemed to be in favor of Israel in most cases, he said. "The prevailing geopolitical environment in the middle-east is seemingly in favor of Israel and the whole Europe unilaterally supports the force."

"Until and unless there is a unity among the Arab countries and a consensus in the Muslim world is developed against Israeli aggressions, we do not expect any change in the fate of the persecuted Palestinian Muslims."

He, however, added that a mass awareness within Israel, especially among the new generation, may also bring a change in the long-persistent oppressive state policy of Israel.

Analyzing the conventional state policy of Israel, Ahmed said Israel has seized the opportunity of the global coronavirus pandemic.

"This is the common characteristic of Israel that whenever they get an opportunity to launch an oppressive move against Palestinians, they do not delay," he said.

Politically cunning Israel may also orchestrate the attack to divert attention from its internal crisis, he said.

"There is an internal crisis in Israel after Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's failure to secure expected victory in the recent national polls of the country. So this attack may be a part of diverting people's attention to Israel's domestic crisis," said Ahmed.

Speakers at a webinar on Friday held for Al- Quds, or Jerusalem Day, said Bangladesh never supports Israeli illegal occupation in Palestine. Some referred to different Quranic verses and speeches of Islam's last prophet, Muhammad. "It is the bounden duty of a Muslim to stand by another Muslim in time of hardship," they said. They urged the global community, especially the Muslim world, to unite against Israeli aggression and solve the Middle East crisis with justice and a humanitarian approach.

In a statement in November 2019, Bangladesh's Foreign Ministry also declared its stance on the legal rights of Palestine.

"Bangladesh reiterates its unflinching support to Palestine and its territorial integrity as established through UNSC 242 and also other UNSC resolutions including UNSCR 338, 425, 1397, 1515 and 1544 and the principle of 'land for peace.'"

Covid-19: Bangladesh suspends flights from Nepal

Bangladesh on Sunday announced it is suspending flights from Nepal amid a sudden surge in Covid-19 cases in the Himalayan nation.

The ban will be effective from Monday, according to Bangladesh's Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh (CAAB).

"In order to reduce the risk of further spreading of coronavirus from the increasingly affected friendly countries, it has been decided to place Nepal in the list of Group A of the circular under reference," a notice by the CAAB read.

"This circular will be effective from May 10 2021 until further notice and all other instructions in the circular under reference will apply in this regard," it added.

Earlier on May 1, the CAAB issued a circular imposing special conditions on travel to 38 countries, considering the risk of Covid-19 transmission, Dhaka Tribune reported.

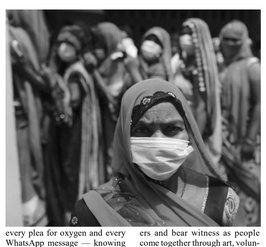
The blaze at the Great Burgan Field in the southeastern desert of Kuwait, which produces over 1.6 million barrels of oil a day, did not impact production, the report said.

For countries under Group A, no incoming or outgoing passengers will be allowed to and from Bangladesh.

Nepal is reeling under the second wave of coronavirus.

On Sunday, the country reported 8,777 new cases of coronavirus infection. With this, the Covid-19 caseload has reached 394,667 on Saturday taking the tally close to 400,000.

Living in India during the Covid crisis isn't what you see from abroad. It's worse and it's better.



Last June, when New York City was in lockdown and the United States was the global center of the Covid-19 pandemic, I was living in Brooklyn when my visa expired. After seven years in the U.S., I suddenly had to book an emergency repatriation flight to Kolkata, India, because, for the first time in my adult life, my country of citizenship was the only one that would take me.

It wasn't easy at all. India had declared a full lockdown on March 25, 2020; it officially expired on May 31, but it has continued in phases since then. After a 19-hour flight spent fully masked with no cabin crew walking the aisles, we needed three hours to get through baggage claim, because all the other passengers had to exit the airport before we were allowed to leave. We were ferried to our quarantine hotels in hired cars escorted by a police fleet. Once there, I spent two weeks in institutional quarantine at my own expense, unable to leave my room. Everyone I spoke to was terrified of me because, as one of the first Indians to travel from America post-Covid-19, they feared I might have brought the coronavirus with me.

It was a legitimate concern then: On June 15, India had only 11,502 new cases among its 1.3 billion people, and the U.S. had 25,314 new cases among its 328 million people.

Now, I feel like I'm back where I started: On Friday, there were 414,188 new Covid-19 cases in India and 42,847 in America. My friends and family from around the world have been messaging me to ask whether I'm OK instead of me asking them, and I don't really know what to say. I am lucky to be healthy and safe, but I am not OK. None of us are.

Since finishing quarantine last year, I have moved around India — from Kolkata to Mumbai to Bangalore — being careful but feeling hopeful that life would slowly go back to normal. In every city, I have participated in full lockdowns; unlike during my last few months in New York, during lockdown in India, people aren't allowed to step outside without valid medical reasons or without being able to verify their status as essential workers, and the government has enforced nighttime curfews to limit people's movement.

And still, over the last few weeks, my country has descended into chaos as Covid-19 cases have spiked to previously unimaginable levels. I am the last person in my family — each of us is in a different country — still awaiting vaccination, and I'm aware it's because of where I live.

Meanwhile, as the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention was issuing guidelines for what activities vaccinated Americans can do unmasked, I was first in self-quarantine and then in lockdown for five weeks — and the case numbers keep rising. The U.S. brought its Covid-19 positivity rate down to 4.5 percent, but in the Indian state of Goa (a popular tourism destination) and my home state, West Bengal (where I first lived when I arrived here), quite literally every other person is testing positive right now.

I'm watching a crisis unfold around me in India while I'm safely indoors, seeing it all happen on screens, wishing I could step outside and help without compromising my safety and knowing I cannot. It creates waves of trauma and despair that everyone here moves through every day, a mental fog that leaves us all feeling numb.

We may be survivors, but we're still in survival mode, wrestling with shame and survivor's guilt for every ambulance siren, every plea for oxygen and every WhatsApp message — knowing that the person in need could have been us and that it might still be us.

The variations in a country of more than a billion people have been flattened out beyond our borders; my friends and family overseas have one general understanding of what is happening.

We feel troubled, and everyone knows people who have it worse, but we're at a loss for what to really do. It feels like there is no order or logic to what is happening — people who have been indoors for weeks report mysteriously testing positive — and so, to cope, we have to take it day by day.

We stay glued to our screens, scrolling through a never-ending feed of catastrophe and doing what we can to help others.

They serve as windows into our shared disaster but also give us hope, as we see moments of human connection in which calls for help are answered by strangers and bear witness as people come together through art, volunteering and fundraising to save lives.

In a country of many contrasts, we may be facing the same crisis, but we are all experiencing different realities, which creates nuances in our perspectives, depending on our privilege and personal circumstances. There are important differences between the situations in different cities and states — each of which has its own lockdown rules and vaccine availability.

On social media, I see my friends in America visiting art galleries, enjoying happy hours and planning (or even going on) vacations. The contrasts stagger me.

But somehow the variations in a huge country of more than a billion people have been flattened out beyond our borders; my friends and family overseas have one general understanding of what is happening from seeing video of funeral pyres and crowded hospitals. **nbcnews**

Man killed in Woodlawn shooting was a recent college graduate from Nepal

Growing up in rural Nepal, Sagar Ghimire faced tragedy at an early age, his uncle said.

One day while the young boy was home alone with his mother, who had fallen ill from a heart condition, she took a turn for the worst.

With no vehicle to take her to the hospital, Ghimire hoisted her onto his back and started walking there.

She wouldn't survive the journey.

On Saturday, Ghimire, who would go on to attend high school in Kathmandu and earn a full scholarship to an American university to study computer science, was shot and killed outside his home in Woodlawn by a neighbor with apparent mental health problems. His uncle said Ghimire will be remembered for his generous spirit.

Police said the shooter, 56-year-old Everton Brown, also killed two other residents of the Parkview Crossing town house complex before police shot him to death. Brown's home and others nearby also were damaged by an explosion Saturday morning.

Kaptan Ghimire said his 24-year-old nephew, who graduated from Claflin University in Orangeburg, South Carolina, in April, was hoping to attend graduate school and had moved to the Woodlawn complex about a week ago to plan his future.

Sagar Ghimire had hoped to use his education to give back to the needy in Nepal, his uncle said. While he studied in the United States, Ghimire even arranged a fundraiser to help a Nepalese person who had contracted HIV pay for medical treatment.

"If somebody needed help, he liked to help right away," said Kaptan Ghimire, 58. "He was a bright light for everybody, his whole country."

Sagar Ghimire would often visit his uncle, who lives in Oakdale, California, during breaks from school.

They enjoyed hiking and simply catching up over coffees at Starbucks, Kaptan Ghimire said, with help from a translator.

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When Ghimire visited in January, his uncle was delighted by how mature he'd become. He was happy, Kaptan Ghimire said, and cooked for his family.

On Monday, Kaptan Ghimire and two of his children will fly to Baltimore, where they will try to arrange funeral proceedings.

They'll have help from a Baltimore County legislator with Nepalese roots.

State Del. Harry Bhandari, a Baltimore County Democrat who was born in Nepal, heard about the shooting while he was attending a car caravan rally Saturday.

He drove to the scene and later connected with Ghimire's family.

He put them in touch with a local funeral home and wants to help some of Ghimire's family members in Nepal come to the U.S. for the memorial, in spite of that country's coronavirus lockdown procedures.