US eases travel restrictions for Pakistan

The US State Department has revised its travel advisory for Pakistan, upgrading it from "no travel" to "avoid unnecessary travels".

The revision — from level four to level three — although not a major change, is still a notable improvement.

"Pakistan's security environment has improved since 2014 when Pakistani security forces undertook concerted counter terrorist and counter militant operations," the latest travel advisory noted.

"There are greater security resources and infrastructure in major cities, particularly Islamabad, and security forces in these areas may be more readily able to respond to an emergency compared to other areas of the country."

The advisory pointed out that "while threats still exist, terrorist attacks are rare in Islamabad."

The notification, however, urged US citizens to "reconsider travel to Pakistan due to terrorism and sectarian violence" and suggested additional caution due to Covid-19, as "some areas have increased risk."

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has issued a Level 2 Travel Health Notice for Pakistan, indicating a moderate level of Covid-19 in the country.

"Your risk of contracting Covid-19 and developing severe symptoms may be lower if you are fully vaccinated with a US-authorised vaccine," it added.

The State Department still urged US citizens not to travel to Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), including the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), due to terrorism and kidnapping. It also advised against traveling to the immediate vicinity of the Line of Control due to terrorism and the potential for armed conflict.

The advisory reminded American citizens that the US government had limited ability to provide emergency services in Pakistan due to the security environment. Travel by US government personnel within Pakistan remained restricted, and the US Consulate General in Peshawar does not provide consular services to US citizens.

The change in US advisory followed a visit to the United States by Pakistan's National Security Advisor Moeed Yusuf and Director General ISI Faiz Hameed, although the development may or may not be related to the visit.

Their talks focused on Afghanistan, with US officials seeking Pakistan's cooperation in preventing a Taliban takeover of Kabul. Pakistan not only assured Washington that it would not support a forcible takeover but also urged the Afghan government not to seek a military victory.

US officials, in briefings to the media and in speeches at think tanks, have made it clear that Washington will not accept a Taliban takeover and persuade other nations as well not to recognise such a government.

Washington has also indicated that it would discontinue its economic support to a Taliban-only government, even though the war-torn country heavily depends on US aid.

Discontinuation of economic assistance and lack of diplomatic recognition could push Afghanistan into complete isolation, creating serious problems for Pakistan as well.

Yusuf later told journalists that during his 10-day stay in Washington no US official or lawmaker asked for a military base in Pakistan. "The word base was not mentioned, not even once, during our talks, except in the media," he said, adding: "Bases were not discussed at all from either side during this trip because we have already made our position clear. That chapter is closed."

Earlier reports in both US and Pakistani media claimed that the Biden administration was seeking military bases in Pakistan to influence developments in Afghanistan, particularly if the Taliban seized Kabul. At recent congressional hearings, US officials did talk about using Pakistani airspace for reaching Afghanistan and having bases in the region but never mentioned asking Pakistan for a base. dawn

Pandemic-hit parents shift kids from private to civic schools

MUMBAI: Sudhir Ahire lost his job during the pandemic last year. Unable to pay private school fees, he shifted his teenage son and nine-year-old daughter to a municipal school. The move from a private school to a civic one seemed painful initially. Now he is all smiles.

With students being denied online classes for non-payment of fees, parents faced with job losses are making their children leave private schools and join civic and aided schools where education is free. The 10 new CBSE schools introduced by the BMC this year, and one ICSE, are flooded with applications. The schools spread across Mumbai have 40 seats each from nursery to Class VI.

"Till 2019, I used to simply write a cheque for fees. It was only when the pandemic struck that I realised my son's fee was Rs 3,100 per month," said Ahire, who was told about his job loss over a message. He tried to seek time from the school for payment of fees. While that did not happen, his son, in class VIII, was not allowed online access. "He was reluctant to go to a municipal school. But at least a dozen of his classmates have also joined," he said.

BMC education officer Raju Tadvi said the non-state board schools run by the municipality are a hit among parents. He said the rush for schools is a result of the pandemic-induced financial crunch. The principal of a civic CBSE school said this year they have got middle-class parents seeking admission for their kids.

Nitin Dalvi, one of the 28 petitioners who moved the Bombay HC against two private schools for denying their children online access due to non-payment of fees, moved his son to a civic school. After court intervention, the schools allowed the 28 students online access from Friday. indiatimes

Bhutan delivers 230,000 doses of Covid-19 vaccine to Nepal

The Bhutanese government on Friday delivered 230,000 doses of AstraZeneca vaccine to Nepal.

A Drok Air plane landed at 9:15am with vaccine doses from Bhutan, according to Pratap Babu Tiwari, general manager at Tribhuvan International Airport.

The Ministry of Health and Population said in a statement on Friday afternoon that 230,000 doses from Bhutan arrived in Kathmandu. The doses were received by senior Foreign Ministry and Health Ministry officials at Tribhuvan International Airport.

"Nepal welcomes the friendly gesture from Bhutan in aiding Nepal's fight against the Covid-19 pandemic," Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba wrote on Twitter, while thanking the Bhutanese king and the Bhutanese prime minister. "Many thanks to HM The King & @PMBhutan for the cooperative arrangement in the supply of 230,000 doses of vaccine, which Nepal will reciprocate at a later date."

Nepal last week had sought vaccine support from Bhutan after learning that the Himalayan kingdom had surplus vaccine doses after inoculating more than 90 percent of its eligible population. Nepal had written to Thimphu for vaccine support on a reciprocal condition.

"As per the tripartite agreement between us, Bhutan government and AstraZeneca, the Bhutanese government delivered the vaccine to us this morning," said Ram Prasad Subedi, deputy chief of mission at the Nepali embassy in New Delhi, which had coordinated the vaccine cooperation from Bhutan. "As per the agreement, we will return once we have surplus doses but there is no concrete timeline for that."

The doses from Bhutan have arrived in Nepal a day ahead of the scheduled arrival of AstraZeneca vaccines from Japan.

Japan announced on Wednesday that half of the 1.6 million doses it has pledged would arrive on Saturday and Sunday.

Around 1.4 million people aged 65 and above who were given the first shots of Covishield, the AstraZeneca type vaccine manufactured by the Serum Institute of India, in the second week of March have been waiting for their second doses. However, the government has not been able to secure any additional AstraZeneca doses.

Although Nepalis are at present getting the Chinese-made Vero Cell vaccine, Nepal began its Covid-19 vaccination campaign with the double-shot AstraZeneca vaccine on January 27 with one million doses of Covishield that India gave Nepal in a grant.

Nepal also received 348,000 doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine in a grant in February from the World Health Organization-backed COVAX facility.

The Indian Army in March provided 100,000 doses of the vaccine for Nepali Army.

Nepal bought two million doses of the Covishield vaccine from Serum Institute of India but after a second wave hit India in March, it banned the export of vaccines.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi during a telephone conversation with Prime Minister Deuba on July 19 said that India would resume the supply of vaccines but it is unclear when Nepal will get vaccines from India.

According to the Ministry of Health and Population data from Friday, 4,403,021, or 14.6 percent of the population, have got the first dose of the Covid-19 vaccine with 2,208,055, or 7.3 percent of the population has been fully vaccinated. kathmandupost

India to get advanced 'eye in the sky' ahead of I-Day with Gisat-1 launch on Aug 12

NEW DELHI: Just three days ahead of the Independence Day, India will finally launch its most advanced geo-imaging satellite (Gisat-1), which will allow better monitoring of the subcontinent, including its borders with Pakistan and China, by imaging the country 4-5 times a day.

The satellite will be launched on August 12 at 5.43am from Sriharikota.

The pandemic delayed the launch of the new-series geo-satellite, which has civilian and strategic importance, several times since last year. Isro's GSLV-F10 rocket will finally put the 2,268-kg Gisat-1, codenamed EOS-3, into the geo-orbit. This will be India's first launch of a primary satellite this year. On February 28, Isro had launched 18 small satellites, including some desi satellites, along with primary satellite Amazonia-1 of Brazil.

Once placed 36,000 km above earth in the geostationary orbit after space manoeuvres, the advanced 'eye in the sky' can constantly monitor areas of interest (the satellite will move in sync with the rotation of the Earth and hence would look stationary) and will give real-time information about a large area unlike other remote sensing satellites placed in lower orbits that come to a spot only at regular intervals. EOS-3 will also enable quick monitoring of natural disasters, episodic and short-term events.

Minister of state for department of space Jitendra Singh, in a response to a question in Rajya Sabha recently, had said that EOS-03 is capable of imaging the whole country 4-5 times daily. The satellite, which is capable of near real-time monitoring of floods and cyclones, will also enable monitoring of water bodies, crops, vegetation conditions and forest cover changes, he said. The satellite will have payload imaging sensors of six-band multispectral visible and near infra-red with 42-metre resolution, 158 bands hyper-spectral visible and near infra-red with 318-metre resolution and 256 bands hyper-spectral short wave infra-red with 191-metre resolution. A 4-metre diameter ogive-shaped payload fairing (heat shield) has been used in the rocket for the first time, an Isro statement said. The satellite was earlier scheduled for launch on March 28 this year but a "minor issue" forced its postponement. The launch was later expected in April and then in May but Covid-triggered restrictions in states where Isro centres are located delayed it again. After the Gisat-1 launch, the other satellite to go up will be EOS-4 or Risat-1A, which is a radar imaging satellite with synthetic aperture radar (SAR) that can take pictures during day and night and can also see through clouds. The satellite weighing over 1,800 kg will be launched by a PSLV in September. The satellite will play a strategic role in the country's defence with its capability to operate in day, night and all weather conditions.

The first developmental flight of the Small Satellite Launch Vehicle (SSLV) or mini-PSLV is also scheduled for the fourth quarter of this year from Sriharikota.

Tajikistan misses big opportunity to mend ties with Kyrgyzstan

Relations between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan reached an all-time low at the end of April when the armed forces of the two countries battled over border issues.

More than 50 people were killed and scores wounded, most of them Kyrgyz citizens.

Attempts at reconciliation along their common border produced mixed results, and a visit to Tajikistan by Kyrgyz President Sadyr Japarov in late June did little to warm relations between the Central Asian neighbors despite talk by Japarov and his Tajik counterpart, Emomali Rahmon, about traditionally friendly ties.

An unexpected opportunity to improve the strained relations came on July 13-14 when 345 ethnic Kyrgyz from Afghanistan's Badakhshan Province chose to flee the increased fighting in their country and crossed into Tajikistan.

Kyrgyz authorities quickly announced they would take the group and the approximately 4,000 livestock they had and resettle them in Kyrgyzstan, as they've done with dozens of other ethnic Kyrgyz from Badakhshan in recent years.

The Afghan Kyrgyz did not want to live in Afghanistan anymore and Tajik officials did not want them to stay in Tajikistan.

Kyrgyzstan said it would accept them and give them land for their livestock and allow them to make a new home in their ancestral country.

Kyrgyz officials had previously discussed the Afghan Kyrgyz with Tajik officials on the sidelines of international conferences and meetings held in Tashkent and Dushanbe from July 14-16.

On July 16, Kyrgyzstan's Foreign Ministry invited the Tajik ambassador for talks on arranging passage for the Afghan Kyrgyz and their herds of animals through Tajikistan to Kyrgyzstan.

But on July 18, Tajikistan's Khovar state news agency reported that the Afghan Kyrgyz had been sent back to Afghanistan after Kabul officials guaranteed their safety. That guarantee is unlikely to satisfy anyone since fighting is raging across Afghanistan and the government cannot realistically guarantee anyone's safety, a point hammered home by a rocket attack outside the presidential palace in Kabul on July 20.

The Kyrgyz Foreign Ministry says its offers to help Tajikistan to move the Afghan Kyrgyz to Kyrgyzstan for resettlement went unanswered and Tajik authorities did not inform Kyrgyzstan about the decision to return the group and their animals to Afghanistan. The Tajik government has, arguably, the worst relationship with the Taliban of all the Central Asian states and does not want to do anything that could further undercut the Afghan government's campaign against the Taliban.

The resettling of Afghan citizens in other countries is a sign of instability and even defeat for Kabul, and it is quite possible Afghan officials asked Tajikistan to send the group of Kyrgyz back to Afghanistan to show that the government and army can still provide security. The ongoing fighting with the Taliban is still very fluid and, while the Taliban have become quite media savvy and their claims of victories are widely disseminated, many areas and provincial capitals are still contested and government forces and their militia allies retook some districts in counteroffensives in mid-July. But for people in Kyrgyzstan, the decision to send their ethnic kin back into the Afghan inferno is just another reason for them to believe the Tajik government is no friend of the Kyrgyz people. rferl