

End this visa regime, Pakistanis say

Sitting in Cocoo's Den, a must-go restaurant in Lahore in the heart of the city's red light district, maverick painter and owner Iqbal Hussein simply can't understand the visa games politicians and officials of India and Pakistan play.

'Why should Indians need visas to come to Pakistan and why should Pakistanis need visas to go to your country?' says a genuinely bewildered Hussein, recalling his last visit to India three years ago with relish.

'I was touched by the hospitality and affection of the people in India. I was really taken care of by my hosts,' Hussein told IANS.

His sentiment is not confined just among the liberals but is becoming part of mainstream political thinking in Pakistan, with former prime minister Nawaz Sharif calling for the abolition of the strict bilateral visa regime.

Indeed, the visa regime will be one of the key themes during talks between Indian Foreign Secretary Shivshankar Menon and his Pakistani counterpart Salman Bashir here Tuesday.

The issue will also figure prominently in discussions between Foreign Ministers Pranab Mukherjee of India and Shah Mehmood Qureshi of Pakistan the next day.

India is studying closely the second draft of a visa agreement submitted by Pakistan that indicates that, despite some differences, the two sides may just clinch a relatively liberal visa pact next week.

A rethink on the restrictive visa regime is high on the priority list of the six-week-old Pakistan Peoples Party-led civilian government in Pakistan that is determined to improve relations with India.

In the Punjab province, where nearly every second family seems to have relatives and friends in India, the proposed relaxation of the visa regime gets a spontaneous welcome.

'In many ways, Nawaz Sharif and the (Pakistan) Muslim League he heads, represents public opinion in the Punjab. He has backed the abolition of the visa regime and this is what people on both sides of the border want,' Mujibur Rahman Shami, editor of Daily Pakistan, told IANS.

'There is an overwhelming cross-party consensus for a quicker and reformed visa system. Every Indian and Pakistani should be allowed to travel freely to each other's country,' Shami said, while slamming the present system of city-wise visas as 'utter nonsense.'

'The media is backing the proposal. Nobody has opposed the idea except for one Urdu daily,' he added.

India and Pakistan are perhaps the only two countries that issue city-specific visas to one another's nationals. Travelling to any place, however close by, outside of the one or two cities for which the visa is valid is illegal.

Khuram Hussain, a business executive who visited India recently, said Indians and Pakistanis were

frustrated over the present system of having to apply for visa for each city they want to visit.

'I had gone to New Delhi. I badly wanted to go to Gurgaon and Noida, just outside Delhi, but I couldn't because I did not have visa to do so,' he said.

An Indian coming to Pakistan faces the same irritant. If he has a visa for Islamabad, he can't go to neighbouring towns like Rawalpindi or Taxila unless the visa permits him.

India is pushing for a visa scheme for more than one state and business visa to be issued within 24 hours and is exasperated over the Pakistani insistence on police reporting for visitors.

The introduction of pilgrim and student visas and visa on arrival are also being discussed between the two sides.

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