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UN SECRETARY GENERAL'S VISIT TO PAKISTAN

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres arrived in Pakistan for a 4-day visit on February 16, 2020. This was his first official visit to Pakistan and came in the background of rising political and military tensions in the region. According to Mr. Guterres, “One of the main purposes of my visit is to spotlight the real Pakistan — with all its possibility and potential.”¹

The United Nations Secretary General's (UNSG) visit to Pakistan was an acknowledgement of the country's commitment to the United Nations and also a testament to Pakistan's unwavering support to global causes. The visit has highlighted the importance of Pakistan as a vital partner of the UN.

The highpoint of the Secretary General's visit was the UNHCR conference on Afghan refugees. The Afghan refugee situation is one of the most long-drawn-out refugee crises in the world. According to Mr. Guterres, "Like all developing countries, Pakistan has contributed little to the problem yet faces disproportionate vulnerability because of it."² He highlighted the fact that the people of Afghanistan have suffered due to prolonged conflict and Pakistan has shown enormous generosity in hosting the Afghan refugees for over four decades. He stated that Pakistan has been one of the top refugee hosting countries in the world and generations of Afghan refugees have grown up in Pakistan which

¹ "In Pakistan, Guterres urges world to step up climate action, praises support to Afghan refugees," *UN News*, February 16, 2020, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/02/1057491>

² "Pakistan contributes little to climate change but is among the most impacted by it: UN chief," *Dawn*, February 16, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1534822>

is now home to them.³ While speaking at a joint press conference with the Pakistani Foreign Minister, he said, “Pakistan has provided the world with a global public good supporting Afghan refugees and it’s time for the international community to assume its responsibilities, and to support Pakistan very meaningfully.”⁴

The UNSG appreciated Pakistan’s compassion, hospitality and open-heartedness for accommodating some 3 million Afghan refugees, of which 1.4 million are registered and continue to find a home in Pakistan.⁵ While talking about the refugees, he said, “Even though major conflicts have since unfortunately erupted in other parts of the globe and the refugee population has soared, Pakistan today is still the world’s second largest refugee-hosting country,”⁶ He thanked the country for hosting Afghan refugees for “such a long time”.⁷ Despite its own set of challenges, Pakistanis have welcomed the Afghan refugees into the society. And over the years, the country has taken a number of measures to devise better facilities for their inclusion into the national economy, as well as provision to healthcare. Biometric registration of Afghan refugees is the latest in the series of such measures. Despite Pakistan’s longstanding support to the Afghan refugees, help from the international community has always remained minimal. This was acknowledged by the UNSG who also expressed his desire for peace to return to Afghanistan and a renewed obligation by the international community in this regard.

During a press conference with the Pakistan Foreign Minister, Shah Mahmood Qureshi, the UNSG also spoke about regional peace and Pakistan-India relations, and stressed on de-escalation between the two countries. The UNSG emphasized greater reliance on diplomacy and dialogue for the resolution of conflicts and also offered to mediate if asked by both parties. He greatly appreciated Pakistan for giving complete access to the United Nations Military Observer Group in India and Pakistan (UNMOGIP) to its part of Kashmir.⁸

³ “World must ‘step up’, match Pakistan’s compassion for refugees, says UN chief,” *UN News*, February 17, 2020. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/02/1057541>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ “Pakistan: Afghan Refugees Registration Update,” *Relief Web*, January 31, 2020. <https://reliefweb.int/report/pakistan/pakistan-afghan-refugee-update-january-2020>

⁶ “World must ‘step up’, match Pakistan’s compassion for refugees, says UN chief,” *UN News*, February 17, 2020. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/02/1057541>

⁷ “UN chief urges world to ‘show similar leadership as Pakistan has shown,’” *The Express Tribune*, February 16, 2020. <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2157937/1-uns-guterres-hails-pakistans-hospitality-meets-afghan-refugees-islamabad/>

⁸ “UN chief thanks Gen Bajwa for giving full access in Kashmir,” *Pakistan Today*, February 17, 2020. <https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2020/02/17/un-chief-thanks-gen-bajwa-for-giving-full-access-in-kashmir/?fbclid=IwAR2P1xf-hyCNM2BAGmpJb9ojzq4bVMABYKHXCnireyJMjqpP93jGd-up9j4#.XkrfDRf-Puw.facebook>

Moreover, the UN chief also applauded Pakistan's efforts and contribution towards UN peacekeeping which stands as an affirmation of the country's commitment to global peace and prosperity. He also praised Pakistan's efforts for the eradication of polio.

While addressing students at a private university in Lahore, the UN chief stated that Pakistan has a burgeoning young population who are making their voices count, "I believe that the youth must have a fundamental voice, but not only a fundamental voice, a fundamental role in the shaping of our common future."⁹ He said that as the UN enters its 75th year, it is important for the formulation of new strategies and policies.¹⁰ The opening of the Kartarpur Corridor by Pakistan was also much appreciated by the UN chief, calling it a commendable step for the enhancement of interfaith harmony and also as Pakistan's dedication to promoting peace. Furthermore, the UN chief valued Pakistan's efforts for the mitigation of climate change, help in bringing peace to Afghanistan, as well as the steps taken by it to eliminate terrorism. As expected, the UNSG's offer of mediation on the Kashmir conflict was rebuffed by India subsequently, calling it a bilateral dispute with no place for third party mediation.

The UNSG's visit to Pakistan signifies that its position on the global stage has gained tremendous credence and was an acknowledgement of the country's contributions in various spheres, be it peacekeeping, interfaith harmony, the hosting of Afghan refugees, as well as its efforts in fighting the adverse effects of climate change. Pakistan's commitment to multilateralism is evident vis a vis its commitment to the principles of the UN and it can also be seen in its cooperation and contributions to the work of the United Nations.

⁹ "Remarks at the Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS)," February 18, 2020. <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2020-02-18/remarks-lahore-university-of-management-sciences>

¹⁰ "Pakistan-India crossing is a 'Corridor of Hope', UN chief says, wraps up visit with call for interfaith dialogue," *UN News*, February 18, 2020. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/02/1057621>