

Minutes of 1st meeting of the Tourism Recovery Action Committee (TRAC) held on April 13, 2020

In the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak, Chairman NTCB constituted the Tourism Recovery Action Committee (TRAC) vide office order: PTDC/NTCB/2018-880, to steer the Tourism sector through these turbulent times. First TRAC meeting took place on April 13, 2020 (Monday) at 11:30 am. The meeting was chaired by Mr. Aftab ur Rehman Rana. The meeting took place via video link using ‘Zoom’ application and was attended by the following members:

Members:

No.	Name	Designation
1	Mr. Aftab Rana	TRAC Chairman / Member NTCB
2	Mr. Asifullah Khan	Secretary Tourism GB
3	Mr. Intikhab Alam	Managing Director PTDC
4	Mr. Maqsood ul Muluk	President (PATO)
5	Mr. Naeem Sharif	Chairman (TAAP)
6	Mr. Zubair Baweja	Chairman (PHA)
7	Ms. Midhat Shahzad	Secretary Tourism AJK
8	Ms. Sumaira Isaacs	Advisor to Chairman NTCB

Representatives:

No.	Name	Designation
9	Mr. Junaid Khan	MD TCKP (Representative of Secretary Tourism KP)
10	Mr. Tanveer Jabbar	MD TDCP (Representative of Secretary Tourism Punjab)
11	Mr. Tasneem Khan	Deputy Controller DTS Punjab (Representative of Secretary Tourism Punjab)

Others:

No.	Name	Designation
12	Mr. Babur Javed	Manager P&P (PTDC)
13	Mr. Umar Yar Khan	Meeting Coordinator / Tourism Consultant

Absent:

No.	Name	Designation
1	Mr. Ghulam Akbar Leghari	Secretary Tourism Sindh
2	Mr. Zafar Buledi	Secretary Tourism Balochistan

Meeting Agenda:

- I. Introduction of Committee Members
- II. Introductory remarks by the Chairman of the committee
- III. Discussion on Terms of Reference (TORs) of the committee and sharing of ideas to prepare recovery plan for the tourism sector
- IV. Summing up and way forward
- V. Vote of thanks

Briefing and Discussion

1. Mr. Aftab Rana welcomed the members and gave the opening remarks, after which the participants introduced themselves. This was followed by a presentation delivered by Mr. Rana to brief the members regarding the impact of COVID-19 on Pakistan's tourism sector. An initial impact analysis of the losses incurred by the sector was also shared during the presentation. It was explained that tourism is one of the worst hit sectors during the ongoing pandemic throughout the world, with international arrival, revenue and employment getting significantly reduced due to the crisis.
2. The presentation was followed up by a discussion amongst the members on ways to enable the tourism sector to sustain the COVID-19 outbreak and steps which are required to recover from it. Members commended the decision of the NTCB to constitute TRAC and expressed that the committee continued deliberations on a regular basis in light of the evolving situation. It was agreed that National as well as Provincial level intervention was required to develop a harmonised and coordinated approach, and every tourism related body will have to play a proactive role in the midst of this global pandemic.
3. It was agreed that the members will share their written recommendations by 18th April 2020 to develop a coherent Recovery Strategy and Action plan, which will subsequently be put in front of the NTCB and the government for necessary action.
4. President Pakistan Association of Tour Operators (PATO) expressed the need for an attitude change amid COVID-19, with incremental steps to first ensure survival, followed by recovery of the tourism industry. A prolonged strategy is needed to support the tourism related businesses. It was suggested that effective lockdown and preventative steps can prove to be a vital step to turn this pandemic into our strength. Pakistan's response during the outbreak could be marketed to the international community to show our commitment to public safety and adherence to hygiene standards. Continued engagement between the public and private sector is imperative to tackle the challenges faced by the sector. He also emphasised that NTCB working groups should be made more active to play their active roles in policy and planning.
5. Secretary Tourism, Gilgit-Baltistan drew attention towards to losses incurred by hotels, restaurants and tour operators in the region and suggested provision of interest free loans to the affected businesses. It was highlighted that numerous businesses invested heavily in preparation of the upcoming tourist season and some even acquired loans to expand their operations. However, due to the global COVID-19 outbreak, tourism activities have come to a standstill, causing significant losses and

creating uncertainty for the future. Need for continued discussion with the private sector was also stated in order to keep up with the ground realities.

6. Chairman of Pakistan Hotel Association (PHA) highlighted the issues faced by the hotel industry. It was stated that hotel occupancy had dropped drastically due to the prevailing situation, which has created problems in meeting the fixed costs incurred by the hotels. It was expressed that the first priority should be to survive, followed by revival strategies. Cash flow issues were identified as the major challenge and it was suggested that the government should consider deferment of utility bills until the situation improved. Many hotels had taken loans to refurbish their premises and revamp their operations. The need for restructuring of repayment plan was emphasized to ease the financial strain on hotels.
7. Chairman of Travel Agents Association of Pakistan (TAAP) drew attention towards the issue faced by the travel agents with respect to the refunds from the international airlines. It was stated that airlines have stopped giving refunds to the travel agents which risks a loss of Rs 5-6 billion, if immediate action is not taken. It was shared that around 1500 travel agents are registered with TAAP, details of which will be shared with the committee to estimate the loss.
8. Managing Director of Tourism Corporation Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (TCKP) stated that the provincial government of KP is working on similar suggestions which have been mentioned by the committee members. TCKP has started an extensive data collection exercise which includes all the relevant stakeholders, under the charge of the Chief Minister. MD TCKP reaffirmed the departments' commitment to play the required role to ensure that the relevant suggestions are implemented.
9. Secretary Tourism, AJK emphasized on the importance of including the private sector in the way forward and appreciated NTCB for including the relevant stakeholders in the committee. It was mentioned that the main priority should be to engage and provide financial cushion to the tourism related businesses. A summary to provide ease in the utility bill payments has been sent to the GB government. Suggestion was also made to provide tax exemptions to the relevant businesses. The recent decision made by the State Bank to provide relief to businesses through provision of low interest loans was appreciated. However, there is a need to spread this information to all the affected individuals, while helping out those businesses who do not have an NTN.
10. Suggestion was also made to initiate online trainings on service excellence, based on international best practices. The available time can be utilized to build staff capacity, while improving departmental efficiencies. It was suggested that all provinces should adopt an enhancement strategy to keep up with tourist expectations. An attitude change is required to attract international tourists by moulding their perception regarding Pakistan, in the aftermath of the virus. It was mentioned that every aspect of the value chain (Airlines, handicrafts, adventure tourism, hotels, travel agents, tour operators etc.) will require an individual strategy to revamp their operations. This time should be utilized to build competencies and introducing new technologies such as virtual tours and live streaming of events etc.

11. Managing Director of Tourism Development Corporation Punjab (TDCP) mentioned that there was minimal coordination between the public and private sector and commended the formulation of TRAC. It was suggested that the current time should also be utilized to finalise the National Tourism Strategy and the National Minimum Standards. COVID-19 may be converted to a strength by propagating the steps and minimum standards being implemented in the country. It should be communicated to the world that we are comparatively a safer country, and minimum standards document can help in this regard. It was also expressed that lockdown has adversely impacted coordination between departments and there is a need to streamline these mechanisms. Suggestion was also made to start 'Kamyab Jawan' courses online through NAVTCC and encouraging businesses to register with the government.
12. Managing Director of PTDC emphasized on the need to develop collaborative mechanisms through TRAC, which should work on a two-pronged approach. Firstly, support should be given to individuals, followed by tourism businesses. It was expressed that first set of recommendations have been submitted to the government for implementation. Committee was informed that a draft document on Minimum Standards in Tourism and Hospitality Sector was in the final stages of completion and it has been shared with the provincial tourism departments and DTS. Once finalised, the standards in tourism and hospitality will be implemented across the country.
13. Deputy Controller DTS Punjab reiterated the need to focus on sustainability of tourism products and services. Tax rebates / rescheduling was suggested to reduce the burden on businesses and enabling them to recover from the financial crunch. The issue of refund through IATA was also restated along with reduction in fees of other departments such as EOBI, social security etc. The first step may be to restart domestic tourism, once the threat of COVID-19 has passed. This will open avenues for greater domestic tourism through targeted marketing and word of mouth referrals. Soft image of Pakistan needs to be promoted throughout this time to be prepared for a boom in 2021.
14. Manager Publicity and Promotion PTDC told the committee that the corporation was ready to launch Brand Pakistan, which was delayed due to the COVID-19 outbreak. It was mentioned that comprehensive marketing campaigns are in place to target the local and international markets. These will be initiated as soon as the situation gets better.
15. Advisor to the Chairman NTCB commended the swift formulation of TRAC, stating that only a few countries currently have a tourism recovery committee in place. The importance of coordination and collaboration in the coming days was also emphasized. It was mentioned that the global economy is currently limping, and recovery from this pandemic may take 2-3 years. The time should be utilized to develop capacities and formulate a comprehensive tourism brand. Pakistan's story may be built around that fact that there have been significantly fewer fatalities in the country as compared to the world.
16. Importance of TRAC's role was highlighted so showcase solid results. It was expressed that an attitude change is required, as people will be travelling very difficult after this crisis has passed. There is a need for attitude change and to adopt clean products and destinations, similar to what Singapore is planning. It was mentioned

that this crisis may be converted to an opportunity by streamlining recovery mechanisms and incorporating minimum standards based on international best practices. The need for upscaling online presence was emphasized by creating LinkedIn profiles and introducing online courses and trainings.

17. It was identified that the recovery process will take time, and that the pandemic will have long-term repercussions on the tourism industry. Domestic tourism might also be affected for the entire season as there are reports that schools may resume classes during the summer vacations. The role of TRAC to undertake a situational analysis was mentioned to develop accurate projection of losses in order to respond appropriately. It was stated that the TRAC members should highlight the recommendations which may be pursued on an immediate basis, which will be communicated to MOFA and Ministry of Finance.
18. It was emphasized that recovery measures should be tailored around Pakistan's environment and needs of the affected businesses. Unregistered businesses cannot be abandoned in the current scenario and efforts should be made to bring them within the legislative ambit. Need for capacity building initiatives was also reiterated to elevate tourism department to the international benchmark.
19. Mr. Rana, in his closing remarks, thanked all the committee members for actively participating in the discussion. He emphasises that the gathering of accurate information and supporting data about the impacts of this crisis on tourism sector is very important for us to make well-informed decisions. Therefore, he requested all the members to try their level best to collect all the relevant information as soon as possible. He said this crisis is not simple as it will have far-reaching impacts on the tourism sector and on the national economy as whole, so there is need that all the stakeholders at federal, provincial and private sector levels work in a coordinated manner to be part of the Solution. He said we can only achieve good results if public and private sector establish a good working relationship to work hand in hand to bounce back effectively.

Conclusion and Way Forward

The meeting was concluded with following way forward:

- All the committee members will send their written input and recommendations for Tourism Recovery Strategy and Action Plan by 18th April, 2020.
- Based on input from all the members, a draft Tourism Recovery Strategy and Action Plan with clear role of each stakeholder will be prepared by the end of April. It will be shared with the committee members for final review and later it will be finalized in the second meeting of TRAC.
- The final draft will be shared with Chairman NTCB, all the provincial tourism departments and associations for implementation.

The meeting ended with vote of thanks from and to the Chair.



(Aftab ur Rehman Rana)
Chairman TRAC