

INDIA-PAKISTAN TIES | INDIA

PM Modi extends condolences to flood victims as Pakistan Finance Minister says he may consider reopening trade

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Pakistan Finance Minister says Islamabad could consider importing Indian vegetables and essentials



Extending “heartfelt condolences” to victims of the floods in Pakistan, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on August 29, 2022 said he was saddened by the situation, in a rare outreach to the neighbouring country on a day Pakistan’s Finance Minister said he could consider reopening trade routes with India.

Meanwhile, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar pitched for more regional trade and for India’s role in helping the neighbourhood to be more “generous” and “non-reciprocal” as it was in Sri Lanka.

“Saddened to see the devastation caused by the floods in Pakistan. We extend our heartfelt condolences to the families of the victims, the injured and all those affected by this natural calamity and hope for an early restoration of normalcy,” Mr. Modi said in a tweet in the evening.

Both Mr. Modi and Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif are expected to attend the SCO summit due to be held at Samarkand in Uzbekistan on September 15-16.

The MEA did not respond to questions about whether the Prime Minister’s message indicated that New Delhi was already in touch with Islamabad over the flooding crisis, in which more than 1,100 people have died. Ministers in Pakistan have said that nearly a third of the country was “under water” due to the incessant rain.

‘No requests’

Diplomatic sources told *The Hindu* that Pakistan had so far not requested aid from India, nor had it been offered.

However, speaking to the media in Islamabad, Pakistan’s Finance Minister Miftah Ismail said that given the extent of the calamity, the Pakistani government could consider reversing its three-year-old ban on trade with India, and open trade routes for vegetables and other essential commodities.

“We will open duty-free import, make it easier and I also want to say that we will consider importing through the land border with India because these prices [of vegetables] are not sustainable,” Mr. Ismail said, according to the Pakistani media, in response to questions about the destruction of standing crops across the country.

The previous Imran Khan government had cancelled all trade ties with India to protest against the reorganisation of Jammu and Kashmir in August 2019, making only two exceptions during this period.

These were for the import of pharmaceutical products during the COVID-19 pandemic and for India to ship 50,000 tonnes of wheat as humanitarian aid to Afghanistan. Mr. Khan had also abruptly aborted a plan to resume trading ties in 2021, after the Armies of India and Pakistan announced a ceasefire agreement.

In recent months, the Shehbaz Sharif government has posted a trade counsellor to its High Commission in Delhi but denied reports that there was any change in the trade policy.

However, hit by the eight weeks of flooding, deaths and destruction of homes, various Cabinet Ministers have made appeals to the international community for assistance, especially as Pakistan is in the midst of an economic crisis already, and the IMF board is set to decide this week on whether to release \$1.2 billion as part of a bailout programme.

“Going forward, I would expect not only the International Monetary Fund, but the international community and international agencies to truly grasp the level of devastation,” Pakistani Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto said.

“I haven’t seen destruction of this scale, I find it very difficult to put into words ... it is overwhelming,” he added in an interview to the *Reuters* news agency.

While it is unclear whether the Modi government will take forward the suggestion to reopen trade or extend aid as it has with Sri Lanka and Afghanistan in the past few months, Mr. Jaishankar spoke at an event to launch an Asia Society policy institute on the importance of regionalism in South Asia.

“Sometimes India as the biggest country has to step forward,” Mr. Jaishankar said in response to a question from Sri Lankan High Commissioner Milinda Moragoda about energising SAARC and BIMSTEC. “I would be a very strong votary of more regionalism, of India actually being more generous and more non reciprocal and more effective in what is building,” he added, saying that if SAARC was “not working”, other regional organisations should be pursued.

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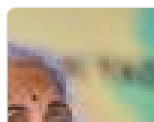


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