

INDIA WANTS VISA-FREE TRAVEL TO KARTARPUR

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The shrine of Guru Nanak Dev in Kartarpur.AP

India has urged Pakistan to grant visa-free travel rights to Indian pilgrims visiting the Kartarpur shrine. The proposal was part of the Indian agenda at Thursday's meeting between delegations from both countries at Attari where the draft agreement for the Kartarpur Corridor was discussed. A joint statement issued after the meeting said the delegations held detailed and constructive discussions on the proposed agreement and agreed to work towards expeditiously operationalising the corridor.

"We emphasised that the access be visa-free and the provision apply to Indians as well as people of Indian origin," S.C.L. Das, Joint Secretary, Ministry of Home Affairs, said at a press briefing after the meeting.

The Indian delegation also insisted that the shrine be kept open throughout the year and sought assurance that access for at least 5,000 pilgrims on any day throughout the week be provided. Infrastructure to enable 10,000 more pilgrims on 'surge' days like Baisakhi and other important festivals, is also being made ready by India.

"The talks held today were part of our ongoing endeavour to realise this long-awaited aspiration of India pilgrims for smooth and easy access to Gurdwara Kartarpur Sahib," Mr. Das said.

"Both sides also held expert level discussions between the technical experts on the alignment and other details of the proposed corridor," said the statement. *The Hindu* had earlier reported about a 'mismatch' between the proposed alignments of Indian and Pakistani plans for the infrastructure.

Sources had earlier informed that India was concerned about the security aspect of the project because of reports of activities by pro-Khalistan elements on the Pakistani side

The joint press statement added that the two sides had agreed to hold the next meeting at Wagah on April 2, 2019. "This will be preceded by a meeting of the technical experts on March 19, 2019 at the proposed zero points to finalise the alignment," it said.

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