

MIGRATION, REMITTANCES AND IMPRISONMENT

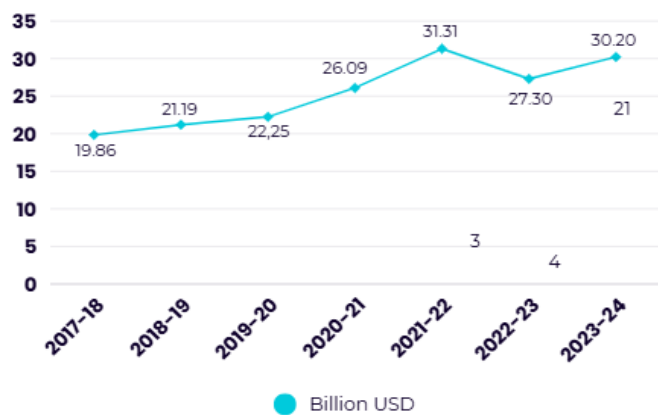
MIGRANT WORKERS AND THE PLIGHT OF PAKISTANIS IN SAUDI ARABIA'S PRISONS

December 2024

Pakistan is counted among the countries that rely heavily on foreign remittances for economic stability and foreign reserves. Encouraged by the state, millions of Pakistanis emigrate to foreign lands to seek better opportunities, particularly in the Gulf countries – the choice of over 96 percent of Pakistan’s expat workforce¹. Most of these migrants are downtrodden blue-collar workers who have never travelled internationally before and have no knowledge of local laws or even their own rights. There are currently over 10 million Pakistani migrants across the globe.²

The Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment reports that 93% of the workers who migrated from Pakistan between 1971 and 2024 went abroad for blue-collar jobs.³ A majority of these emigrants comprised semi-skilled or unskilled labourers. Saudi Arabia is the most popular destination, with 7.1 million Pakistanis⁴ opting to go to the Kingdom for a better future over the same period.

Personal Remittances by Overseas Pakistanis in USD



**US\$30.2
BILLION**

IN REMITTANCES FROM
PAKISTANIS ABROAD IN 2024

93% OF PAKISTANI MIGRANT WORKERS BETWEEN
1971 AND 2024 WENT ABROAD FOR
BLUE-COLLAR JOBS

¹ Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment, *Labour Migration Report 2020*
<https://beoe.gov.pk/files/statistics/yearly-reports/2020/2020-full.pdf>

² Overseas Pakistanis Foundation, Ministry of Overseas Pakistanis and Human Resource Development, <https://ophrd.gov.pk/>

³ Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment, *Statement Showing Number Of Pakistani Workers Registered For Employment Abroad 1971-2024*
<https://beoe.gov.pk/files/statistics/2024/category.pdf>

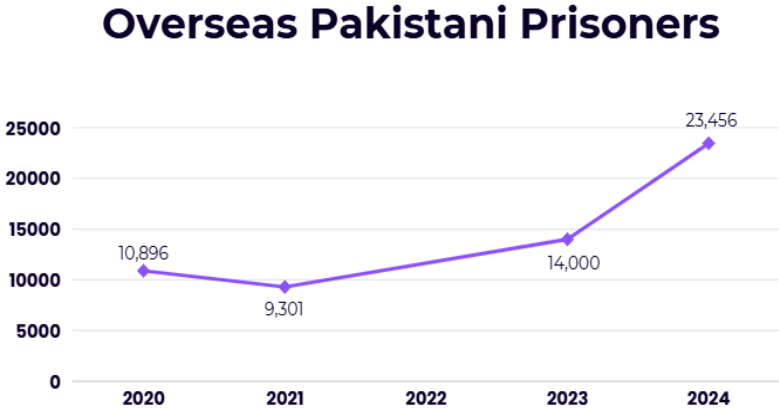
⁴ Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment, *Statement Showing Number Of Pakistani Workers Registered For Employment Abroad During The Period 1971-2024 (up to November)*, <https://beoe.gov.pk/files/statistics/2024/country.pdf>

Pakistan receives record high remittances from its citizens abroad each year. In 2021, Pakistan received a massive \$31 billion in foreign remittances.⁵ This number dropped to \$26.3 billion in 2023, owing to financial issues in Gulf countries and restrictive financial policies in Pakistan, but has since bounced back to over \$30 billion in 2024, as of November.⁶

However, despite its dependence on foreign remittances from migrant workers, Pakistan has done little to protect these vulnerable citizens from landing in foreign jails. As a result, Pakistan has seen a significant increase in the number of prisoners and executions abroad.

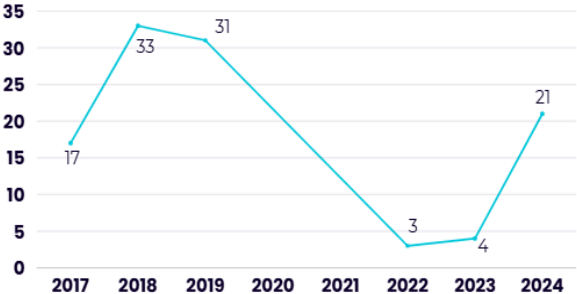
A REGIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Gulf countries have witnessed an influx of migrant workers since the 60s, commonly known as the third wave of migration to GCC countries. The region has been a popular destination for all Asian countries including Pakistan. Four of the six Gulf countries – Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait and Oman – were featured in the top ten destinations for South Asian nationals in 2017. Economic opportunities in oil-rich Gulf countries have led to 30 million foreign nationals currently living in GCC countries - 52 percent of the entire region’s population.⁷



Unfortunately, Pakistan lags far behind India and Bangladesh – which have similar patterns of migration and remittances – when it comes to protecting the rights of its migrants. **Pakistan is yet to enact a uniform policy to provide adequate consular protection facilities and legal aid to those entangled in a foreign criminal justice system.** Hence, Pakistan maintains an extremely high population of overseas prisoners, the majority of whom are incarcerated in the Gulf.

Executions of Pakistanis in Saudi Arabia



According to official statistics submitted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the Lahore High Court (LHC), there were 8,597 Pakistanis imprisoned in 63 countries in 2015⁸. By 2024, this number has increased to **23,456 overseas Pakistani prisoners in 88 countries**⁹, with the highest number of prisoners in Saudi

⁵ State Bank of Pakistan, *Country-Wise Worker Remittances*, October 2024 <https://www.sdp.org.pk/ecodata/homeremitt.pdf>

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Gulf Labour Markets & Migration, *Explaining the “Demographic Imbalance” in the Gulf States*, <https://gulfmigration.grc.net/explaining-the-demographic-imbalance-in-the-gulf-states/>

⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan (2015)

⁹ Justice Project Pakistan, *Pakistani Prisoners Abroad*, (September 2024) <https://jpp.org.pk/overseaspakprisoners/>

Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, respectively. The number of Pakistani prisoners in Saudi Arabia has increased from **1,509 in 2015 to 10,234 in 2024**. On the other hand, countries such as Bangladesh have successfully managed to reduce the number of prisoners abroad. There were 15,149¹⁰ Bangladeshi nationals imprisoned abroad in 2017, but by 2024 the number has dropped to 11,450¹¹ — showing a decrease of nearly 25 per cent.

THE PLIGHT OF OVERSEAS PAKISTANI PRISONERS

In the absence of permanent mechanisms, it is impossible for missions abroad to protect the rights of such a large number of migrant workers. Pakistanis accounted for a whopping 57 per cent of the reported Saudi death row population in 2019, and 20% of the foreign nationals executed by the Kingdom in 2024. While heightened diplomatic engagement with the Kingdom saw a halt on all executions of Pakistanis since 2019, it was reported in November 2022 that three Pakistani nationals had been executed in Saudi Arabia. These executions continued, with three more Pakistanis executed in 2023. **In 2024, 21 Pakistanis were executed in the Kingdom, the highest number of any other nationality in the Kingdom. This is a critically worrying number, and it is essential that the Government of Pakistan intensify its efforts to uphold and protect the rights of Pakistani nationals imprisoned in Saudi Arabia, particularly those at risk of execution.**

Detained Pakistanis suffer rampant due process violations¹², such as:

- Long periods of detention without charge or trial
- No access to legal assistance and inability to navigate the Saudi criminal justice system
- Pressure from authorities to sign confessions and accept predetermined prison sentences
- Ineffective translation services for defendants

These Pakistanis are doubly vulnerable, considering their country of origin does not have a uniform consular protection policy, leaving them at the mercy of local courts which are notorious for failing to meet international standards for a fair trial. The lack of adequate consular assistance results in harsher sentences for these prisoners. They have to spend indefinite periods in detention due to the absence of prisoner transfer agreements.

Pakistanis convicted for drug offences are particularly vulnerable to being executed in countries that carry out the death penalty. An analysis of 97 executions of Pakistanis carried out in Saudi Arabia and Iran shows that between 2016 and 2019, every 9 out of 10 executions have been in relation to drug offences. While the Saudi Human Rights Commission announced that the Kingdom was ceasing to execute for drug offences in January 2021, this commitment was unfortunately reversed in November 2022, with the executions of three Pakistanis for drug offences.¹³ Since then, several Pakistanis have been executed for drug offences, with the most recent beheading of a Pakistani for this crime taking place on 16th November 2024.¹⁴ This is even more tragic and concerning given that in July 2023, Pakistan struck off the death penalty for drug offences, yet Pakistani nationals continue to be at risk of execution for this crime overseas.

In February 2022, Pakistan finalised a Prisoner Transfer Agreement with Saudi Arabia. It is yet unclear whether any repatriations have taken place under this agreement. A large portion of convicted overseas Pakistani prisoners in Saudi Arabia, and indeed in other countries, can be repatriated if the Government of Pakistan both implements such

¹⁰ BD News 24, *Over 15,000 Bangladeshis in foreign jails now, parliament told* (20 November 2024) <https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2017/11/20/over-15000-bangladeshis-in-foreign-jails-now-parliament-told>

¹¹ Dhaka Tribune, *11,450 Bangladeshis in foreign prisons in 31 countries* (01 July 2024) <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/350757/11-450-bangladeshis-in-foreign-prisons-of-31>

¹² Justice Project Pakistan, 'Caught in a Web: Treatment of Pakistanis in the Saudi Criminal Justice System', (March 2018) <https://www.ipp.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/CAUGHT-IN-A-WEB.pdf>

¹³ UN OHCHR, *Saudi Arabia: Resumption of executions for drug-related offences* (22 November 2022) <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-briefing-notes/2022/11/saudi-arabia-resumption-executions-drug-related-offences>

¹⁴ Express Tribune, *21 Pakistanis executed in KSA in 2024*, (18 November 2024) <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2510265/21-pakistanis-executed-in-ksa-in-2024>

existing agreements, and finalises new ones with other countries. In light of the heavy dependence of the economy on the financial contributions of Pakistani migrants, it is unconscionable that every step is not taken to safeguard their rights and extend them every possible protection. The Government of Pakistan must fulfill its duty under the Constitution and its international law commitments to uphold the rights of its vulnerable citizens.

A PROMISE WAITING TO BE FULFILLED

2019

KSA Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman visits Pakistan during which Prime Minister Imran Khan pleads for kindness for Pakistani prisoners in Saudi Arabia. The prince promises to do 'all that he can' and dubs himself 'Pakistan's ambassador in Saudi Arabia'

2020

An analysis of the list submitted by MoFA shows that only 89 Pakistani prisoners have been deported since February 18, 2019, when the promise was made.

2021

The Saudi Human Rights Commission declares that it will no longer execute for drug offences, instead focusing on more rehabilitative and humane alternatives for address these crimes.

2022

The first executions of Pakistani nationals since 2019 are recorded. Saudi continues to execute Pakistanis into 2023, showing no signs of slowing down as a result of decreased diplomatic engagement and lack of implementation of the Prisoner Transfer Agreement signed by the two countries in 2022.

2023

Executions of Pakistanis in Saudi Arabia continue, with 4 in 2023. In total, 7 Pakistanis have been executed since 2022.

2024

21 Pakistanis have been executed this year as of November 2024. In total, 28 Pakistanis have been executed since 2022, with no action being taken to prevent these killings. The Prisoner Transfer Agreement remains unimplemented and unused.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Identify the names and details of Pakistanis on death row and investigate the circumstances of their arrest and imprisonment
- Enact a uniform consular protection policy for Pakistanis facing imprisonment and/or execution abroad
- Ensure each Pakistani prisoner on death row is guaranteed consular support and provided adequate legal representation, especially in countries with a significant number of Pakistani prisoners
- Coordinate information between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Overseas Pakistanis to ensure missions are carrying out their responsibilities as stated in the Supreme Court guidelines
- Negotiate a prisoner transfer agreement with countries that have a high number of Pakistani prisoners so that these Pakistanis can serve the remainder of their sentences in their home country
- Expedite the process of repatriating the 10,432 Pakistani prisoners in Saudi jails under the bilateral Prisoner Transfer Agreement.