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Guidelines

Vaisakhi (Baisakhi) Festival During COVID-19





Objective

To provide guidelines to the local authorities, faith-based organizations, faith communities and local organizers of mass gatherings on education, preparedness, and response to reduce the risks of COVID-19 transmission during Vaisakhi (Baisakhi festival) across 12th – 20th of April 2021.

Rationale

In the context of COVID-19, mass gatherings are events that could amplify the transmission of the virus. Vaisakhi also pronounced as Baisakhi is observed by Hindus and Sikhs as religious and cultural event, and is celebrated between 12-20th April every year. It signifies the Hindu Solar New Year, beginning of the harvest festival, birth of the Khalsa and Punjabi new year.

The Baisakhi is the most important **“Sikh Religious and cultural Gathering”** marking the birth of the Sikh faith and every year Pakistan observes **participation from all over the world** at the shrines of Panja Sahib and Nankana Sahib. This year also the Sikh community will perform their religious rites during the festival, while observing social distancing, and adhering to COVID 19 SOPs. The main events/congregations of the celebrations will be held at the shrines of Panja Sahib and Nankana Sahib.

Major Religious Activities and Celebrations at the Gurdwara includes:

- Fairs and festivals, animal races are organized in different parts of Punjab.
- Ritual Bathing
- Amrit Sanchaar for new Khalsa
- Parades
- Nagar Kirtan (hymn singing)
- Distribution of food
- Observances of Prayers, Procession and raising of the Nishan Sahib flag.

Guiding Principles

The size of the festival gatherings will be determined based on National and local safety regulations under the guidance of local health authorities, while keeping view of the local transmission of the infection.

A direct link and channels of communication between event organizers, health authorities, local authorities looking after the Gurdwara, religious leader and other relevant stakeholders should be established.

- Expected pilgrims/visitors will be permitted to visit Gurdwara Punja Sahib and Nankana Sahib.
- **Outdoor gatherings only** are strongly recommended during the event in which individuals should remain spaced at least 3 feet apart



- All individuals with COVID-19 symptoms, who are contacts of COVID-19 cases during their period of quarantine and those with co-morbidities (older individuals, persons with uncontrolled diabetes, hypertension, heart disease and chronic chest conditions) **must not attend** the event.
- Provinces and Districts/Cities in Pakistan with evidence of isolated cases or limited community transmission and less than 5% positivity rate with no evidence of exposure in large communal settings should be considered to attend the event with ***the number of participants not exceeding the pre-decided National/Provincial quota.***
- The Provinces and districts/cities with ***test positivity rates averaging more than 5% for more than a week should not be invited and should not be permitted to attend*** the event.

International Pilgrims-Inbound Travelers' Criteria

- All international pilgrims who are travelling to Pakistan for the festival are required to install, register and download Pass-track application (mobile based or web-based version whichever is feasible), and insert data on the pass track app before landing in Pakistan (available at Android Play store <https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.passtrack.nitb.gov.pk>)
- Returning travellers from Category A countries (number of cases in 15 Days Per Million equal or less than 500 and less than 5% positivity rate)
 - No COVID-19 test before or after travel
- Returning travellers from Category B countries (number of cases in 15 Days Per Million equal or greater than 500 and more than 5% positivity rate)
 - Mandatory testing results updated through Pass-track before arrival or shows proof of a negative test within 96 hours of arrival.
- In event gathering (indoor mandatory) to accommodate the participants, 6 feet apart social distancing calculated space criteria for minimum 25 individuals is 900 squares feet². However, for 3 feet social distancing space criteria for minimum 25 individuals is 225 square feet, should be considered according to the decided National social distancing criteria and National quota for the participants.
- ***Children, and participants at higher risk for severe illness must not be allowed*** to attend the event (including older adults >65 years age and people of any age with underlying medical conditions i.e. (uncontrolled hypertension, heart disease, diabetes, chronic bronchitis and other debilitating conditions).
- ***Hand shaking, and hugging must not be*** allowed while greeting each other

Guidance before attending and travelling to the Baisakhi Festival

- All participants should be briefed about safety precautions, hand sanitization, social distancing and mandatory face mask use at an appropriate time before the travel starts.
- ***Symptomatic screening should be ensured at the point of entry*** for all the participants before embarking on the journey to Gurdwara (the holy shrine)



- If any intended traveler is having symptoms of COVID 19 or contact of COVID 19 positive person in last 14 days, s/he should be tested (RAT or PCR) and only allowed to travel if tests negative for COVID 19.
- It will be mandatory to wear the face mask during the entire festival event including rituals/congregations. All participants should bring adequate PPEs and supplies for the event: including, **Anti COVID 19 kit (at least 10 face masks and one hand sanitizer)**, paper towels, tissues, disinfectant wipes and cloth face coverings (as feasible).
- ***It will be advised to the Pilgrim that during road travelling to the Gurdwaras, they should maintain adequate distance in the transport*** vans/buses (e.g., skip rows or keep middle seat empty) where possible. Drivers and passengers should practice all safety actions and protocols (e.g., hand hygiene, face coverings, use of hand sanitizers). Driver should clean and disinfect buses or other transport vehicles before and after the travelling.
- The ***social distancing*** should be observed during air travel according to the SOPs advised to the respective airline service through the Aviation division.

Guidance during (indoor mandatory) Congregations/Rituals

- ***Hygiene and Respiratory Etiquette, Cloth Face Coverings/Face masks***; should be mandatory
- Conduct daily health checks (e.g., thermal and symptoms-based screening) of all attendees and members
- ***Sign posting and Messages***- Post signs in highly visible locations (e.g., at entrances, in restrooms) that promote everyday protective measures in different local languages.

Social Distancing /Physical Barriers

- ***Congregation*** activities with seating capacity of 3 feet apart as much as possible.
- Use loud speakers at the rituals/congregation site so that people may hear the hymns, prayers and religious messages while maintaining the social distancing.
- Provide physical guides, such as tape on floors or sidewalks and signs on walls, to ensure that individuals remain at least 3 feet apart in lines and at other times (e.g., guides for creating one-way routes)

Staggering at Communal spaces;

- Avoid Stagger use of shared indoor spaces such as halls, and lounges as much as possible and clean and disinfect them frequently before and after the use.
- Avoid crowding at points of entry and exit in the gurdwara.

Cohorting the participants

- Ensure that participants and groups are as static as possible by having the same group of the participants from the same province and/or districts, or of the same country, in one demarcated location.
- The same country/region religious leader should be assigned to a fixed cohort of participants, where possible, to minimize the exposure of different groups to each other during the communal activities with social distancing.



Food Service

- Avoid communal meals. Consider pre-packaged boxes or bags for each participant to be delivered directly to the person. If this is not possible the food must be served to the individual camps/cohorts with all standard hygienic measures.
- Use disposable utensils and dishes. If disposable items are not feasible or desirable, ensure that all non-disposable food service items are handled with gloves and washed with dish soap and hot water.

Restrooms

- Do not allow lines or crowds to form near the restroom without maintaining a distance of at least 6 feet from other people. It may be helpful to post signs or markers to help attendees maintain the appropriate social distance.
- Ensure that restrooms are operational, cleaned and disinfected with house-hold bleach regularly, particularly high-touch surfaces

Ventilation

- Avoid the use of air conditioners within the gurdwara and in the indoor gatherings.
- Ensure ventilation systems operate properly and increase circulation of outdoor air as much as possible. If portable ventilation equipment like fans are used, take steps to minimize air from them blowing from one person directly at another person to reduce the potential spread of any airborne or aerosolized viruses.

Guidance during Fairs, Procession and Parades

Establish direct links and channels of communication between procession and organizers, health authorities, local authorities, religious leaders and other relevant stakeholders.

- ***Procession and fairs should*** adhere to proper COVID-19 standard operating procedures/ protocols.
- ***Mandatory wearing of masks for all participants.***
- Availability / use of ***sanitizers at regular intervals and multiple spots.***
- Maintaining ***social distance*** of 3 feet and regulate the number and flow of people entering, attending, and departing from the event.
- Children and older adults >65 years age with underlying medical conditions must not attend event and should be encouraged to participate through **live streaming.**
- Multiple symptomatic screening desks should be ensured at the point of entry.
- If any procession/fair participant is having symptoms of COVID 19 or history of contact of COVID 19 positive person in last 14 days, must not be allowed to attend
- Number of ***participants should be kept reasonable and grouped in cohorts*** with reduced timings for the procession/fair timings and focused ***essential activities.***
- Services of the trained administrators from the procession organizers should be availed for checking temperature through thermal guns, identifying the symptoms of COVID 19, facilitating the processions in rows maintaining 3feet between individuals and probe information from suspected



individuals. Also, they should update and distribute timely and accurate emergency communication information with the organizers or the focal person of health care/health department

- *Signs/posters* should be used in the prominent places to guide the participants for following SOPs.
- Consider using individual *pre-packaged boxes/servings* of religious or ceremonial foods/sweets.
- Participants are advised to bring their own water bottles to *avoid drinking at the communal places* with shared cups. Disposable cups should be used at the points of water containers.

Cleaning and Disinfection

- Establish routine cleaning of festival site/Gurdwara with disinfectants including the indoor spaces, open courtyards, and other buildings where people gather.
- Disinfect the frequently touched objects such as doorknobs, light switches, and stair railings and sacred icons.
- Avoid sharing cell phones, camera and other devices unless disinfected.
- Clean and disinfect the Mats used in the congregation place
 - Disinfect surfaces with 70% alcohol where the use of bleach is not suitable.
 - Freshly prepared 1% sodium hypochlorite is effective.

Guidance for Accommodation

Guidance for Accommodation in camps for Pilgrims

- It is advised that camps of the participants must be in outdoor places with bedding arrangements to the minimum safe distance of **6 feet** in a normal sized camp.

Guidance for Hotel Accommodation for Pilgrims

Hotels must comply strongly to risk management and take responsibility for the systematic implementation of measures to minimize risk for the Pilgrims.

- At the entrance of the hotel/rooms there should be: Thermal scanning; sign and floor markings for the **6 feet** social distancing, Sanitizers at the entrance /Reception and disinfect and clean the luggage of the guest.
- **Cleaning** and disinfecting rooms following SOPs and protocols with particular attention to high-touch surfaces.
- **Room Recovery-** If there is a presumptive/suspected case of COVID-19, the affected guestroom should be removed from service and quarantined for at least 24 hours with enhanced disinfection¹.

Maintaining Healthy Operations

Baisakhi event organizers should consider implementing several strategies to maintain healthy operations.

Regulatory Awareness- The gurdwara/festival organizers should be aware of the Federal/Provincial regulatory policies/guidelines related to group gatherings.

Testing of participants



The local authorities should make arrangements for Rapid Antigen Test (RAT) on site. In case of non-availability, samples may be collected for RT-PCR with a rapid turnaround time of the test result (not more than 10-12 hrs).

The event participants should be recommended for COVID-19 test, in consultation with local health officials in following circumstances:

- Asymptomatic individuals with recent known or suspected exposure to COVID-19.
- Individuals with signs or symptoms consistent with COVID-19
- Sentinel site-based testing of all or selected groups of individuals in consultation with local health officials

Isolation and Quarantine place

- Designated isolation/quarantine place/rooms for the symptomatic persons should be established till the test results are confirmed negative or otherwise recommended by local health authorities.

Designated COVID-19 Point of Contact

- Designated administrator/team from the Gurdwara organizers will be responsible for responding to COVID-19 concerns, testing coordination and collaboration with the local health authorities, as needed
- The Gurdwara/event organizers (Pakistan Sikh Gurdwara Parbandak Committee **PSGPC** and along with the Evacuee trust Property Board **ETPB**) should share the details of tour operators and are advised to retain the names and contact details of all participants. This will help public health authorities to contact and/or trace people who may have been exposed to COVID-19 or if one or more members become ill shortly after the event

Note: The above recommendations are being regularly reviewed by the Ministry of National Health Services, Regulations & Coordination and will be updated based on the international & national recommendations and best practices.

The Ministry acknowledges the contribution of Dr Urooj Aqeel and HSA/ HPSIU/ NIH team to compile these guidelines.

References

1. CDC Guidelines. Cleaning and Disinfecting Your Facility Every Day and When Someone is Sick (https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/disinfecting-building-facility.html?CDC_AA_refVal=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Fcoronavirus%2F2019-ncov%2Fcommunity%2Forganizations%2Fcleaning-disinfection.html)
2. Guidelines for Marriage Halls and Marquees Reopening During COVID 19-covid.gov.pk



Annex A

UPDATED LIST 17th March– VALID FROM 20th March 2021

CATEGORY A: INTERNATIONAL TRAVELERS FROM FOLLOWING COUNTRIES DO NOT REQUIRE COVID-19 PCR TEST BEFORE ENTRY INTO PAKISTAN (CATEGORY A)

Sr	Country
1	Australia
2	Bhutan
3	China
4	Cuba
5	Fiji
6	Gambia
7	Iceland
8	Japan
9	Kazakhstan
10	Malaysia
11	Mongolia
12	Morocco
13	New Zealand
14	Nigeria
15	Russia
16	Rwanda
17	South Korea
18	Saudi Arabia
19	Sri Lanka
20	Trinidad and Tobago
21	Uganda
22	Zimbabwe



CATEGORY B: INTERNATIONAL TRAVELERS FROM COUNTRIES NOT SPECIFIED IN CATEGORY B, REQUIRE COVID-19 PCR TEST BEFORE COMMENCEMENT OF TRAVEL TO PAKISTAN (MAX 96HRS OLD)

Sr No.	Countries
1	Afghanistan
2	Albania
3	Algeria
4	Andorra
5	Angola
6	Anguilla
7	Antigua and Barbuda
8	Argentina
9	Aruba
10	Austria
11	Azerbaijan
12	Bahamas
13	Bahrain
14	Bangladesh
15	Barbados
16	Belarus
17	Belgium
18	Belize
19	Benin
20	Bermuda
21	Bolivia
22	Bonaire Sint Eustatius and Saba
23	Bosnia and Herzegovina
24	British Virgin Islands
25	Brunei
26	Bulgaria
27	Burkina Faso
28	Burundi
29	Cape Verde
30	Cambodia
31	Cameroon
32	Canada



Sr No.	Countries
33	Central African Republic
34	Cayman Islands
35	Chad
36	Channel Islands
37	Chile
38	Congo
39	Costa Rica
40	Cote d'Ivoire
41	Croatia
42	Curacao
43	Cyprus
44	Czech Republic
45	Democratic Republic of Congo
46	Denmark
47	Diamond Princess
48	Djibouti
49	Dominica
50	Dominican Republic
51	Ecuador
52	Egypt
53	El Salvador
54	Equatorial Guinea
55	Eritrea
56	Estonia
57	Eswatini
58	Ethiopia
59	Faeroe Islands
60	Falkland Islands
61	Finland
62	France
63	French Guiana
64	French Polynesia
65	Gabon
66	Georgia
67	Germany
68	Gibraltar
69	Greece
70	Greenland



Sr No.	Countries
71	Grenada
72	Guadeloupe
73	Guam
74	Guatemala
75	Guernsey
76	Guinea
77	Guinea-Bissau
78	Guyana
79	Haiti
80	Honduras
81	Hungary
82	India
83	Indonesia
84	Iran
85	Iraq
86	Isle of Man
87	Italy
88	Ivory Coast
89	Jamaica
90	Jersey
91	Jordan
92	Kosovo
93	Kuwait
94	Kyrgyzstan
95	Laos
96	Latvia
97	Lebanon
98	Lesotho
99	Liberia
100	Libya
101	Liechtenstein
102	Lithuania
103	Luxembourg
104	Macedonia
105	Macao
106	Madagascar
107	Malawi
108	Maldives



Sr No.	Countries
109	Mali
110	Malta
111	Marshall Islands
112	Martinique
113	Mauritania
114	Mauritius
115	Mayotte
116	Mexico
117	Micronesia (country)
118	Moldova
119	Monaco
120	Montenegro
121	Montserrat
122	MS Zaandam
123	Myanmar
124	Namibia
125	Nepal
126	Netherlands
127	New Caledonia
128	Nicaragua
129	Niger
130	Northern Mariana Islands
131	North Macedonia
132	Norway
133	Oman
134	Pakistan
135	Palestine
136	Panama
137	Papua New Guinea
138	Paraguay
139	Philippines
140	Poland
141	Puerto Rico
142	Qatar
143	Romania
144	Réunion
145	Saint Kitts and Nevis
146	Saint Lucia



Sr No.	Countries
147	Saint Martin
148	Saint Pierre Miquelon
149	Samoa
150	San Marino
151	Sao Tome and Principe
152	Senegal
153	Serbia
154	Seychelles
155	Sierra Leone
156	Singapore
157	Sint Maarten
158	Slovakia
159	Slovenia
160	Solomon Islands
161	Somalia
162	South Sudan
163	Spain
164	St. Barth
165	St. Vincent Grenadines
166	Sudan
167	Suriname
168	Swaziland
169	Sweden
170	Switzerland
171	Syria
172	Tajikistan
173	Thailand
174	Timor-Leste
175	Togo
176	Tunisia
177	Turkey
178	Turks and Caicos
179	United Arab Emirates
180	Ukraine
181	Uruguay
182	USA
183	Uzbekistan
184	Vanuatu



Sr No.	Countries
185	Vatican City
186	Venezuela
187	Vietnam
188	Wallis and Futuna
189	Western Sahara
190	Yemen



CATEGORY C: INTERNATIONAL TRAVELERS FROM COUNTRIES NOT SPECIFIED IN CATEGORY A & B, NOT ALLOWED TO TRAVEL TO PAKISTAN

Sr	Country
1	Botswana
2	Brazil
3	Caribbean Netherlands
4	Colombia
5	Comoros
6	Ghana
7	Ireland
8	Kenya
9	Mozambique
10	Peru
11	Portugal
12	South Africa
13	Tanzania
14	United Kingdom
15	Zambia