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**Model of progress**

I am currently in Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan, to participate in the International Conference on 'Central and South Asia: Regional Connectivity. Challenges and Opportunities', being held at the special initiative of the President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev.

Prime Minister Imran Khan has also arrived here to jointly inaugurate the opening session of the CASA conference. On the occasion, a number of trade agreements have been signed in different business areas, including the Uzbekistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement. The two countries also agreed in principle to resume direct flight operations very soon.

The business delegation under the Ministry of Commerce is composed of prominent Pakistani businessmen who have established themselves in the relevant field after a long struggle. Due to the current global situation, the Pakistani business community is quite hopeful that our exports can increase by 20-30 percent this year. Serious steps have been taken by the current government to promote trade activities. Similarly, the business community is cooperating with the government to strengthen the national economy.

No doubt, Uzbekistan is one of the most beautiful countries in the world that was part of the Soviet Union just three decades ago. The defeat of Soviet forces in Afghanistan paved the way for the independence for Uzbekistan and other Central Asian States. Uzbekistan is also a doubly landlocked country surrounded by other landlocked countries.

The total population of Uzbekistan is about 33.5 million. Constitutionally, all citizens enjoy equal civic rights. Uzbekistan is administratively divided into twelve provinces, one autonomous republic and one independent city. The provinces are further divided into different districts. A large number of Russians are also residing here.

The city of Tashkent, with its glorious past, is considered the cultural capital of the Islamic world. There are thousands of historical and religious sites throughout the country. The shrines of many great personalities, including Imam Bukhari, Imam Naqashbandi, and conqueror Timur are also located there. There is also an eighteen meter long tomb attributed to the Prophet Daniel. People of different nationalities and religions are seen worshiping here together.

The Uzbek citizens show a special love and affection for people of Pakistan. It is a fact that the Central Asian states are bound with Pakistan by historical and cultural ties. According to a study, the vocabulary of Urdu language includes a large number of Uzbek words. Many great Uzbek personalities, including Imam Bukhari, Imam Tirmidhi, Al-Khwarizmi and Al-Beruni, are highly regarded in Pakistan. The founder of the Mughal Empire, Zaheer-ud-Din Babar, also came from here. Interestingly, there is no time difference between Pakistan and Uzbekistan.

The salient features of the Uzbek society are religious harmony and control on crimes. Uzbeks are committed to ensuring the protection of human rights. They consider it their social duty to pick up garbage to clean their homes and neighborhoods. Women have equal opportunities to play an active role in the country's development.

The current Uzbek government understands the importance of promoting tourism. In this regard, border restrictions with neighbouring countries are being eased to facilitate public and business relations. Recently, Uzbekistan has also played a pivotal role for the success of the Afghan peace process.

Although Uzbekistan achieved independence much later than us; but in the journey of development and prosperity, it has gone far ahead of us. Magnificent buildings, excellent transport facilities and high quality infrastructure have transformed Uzbekistan into a developed and modern country. In my view, we need to learn a lot from the Uzbek model of economic progress; the business community is especially in a better position to explore various trade opportunities. Hopefully, Prime Minister Imran Khan's participation in the CASA conference will result in connecting Pakistan with the Central Asian region effectively and efficiently.

The writer is a member of the National Assembly and patron-in-chief of the Pakistan Hindu Council.

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