

PIA plans European comeback

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Islamabad: Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) announced that it expects to resume flights to Europe soon, targeting several destinations in the UK. This development follows the European Union Aviation Safety Agency (EASA) lifting its suspension of the airline's authorization to operate within the EU. EASA had imposed the ban in June 2020 due to concerns over Pakistan's Civil Aviation Authority (PCAA) and its ability to ensure compliance with international aviation standards.

"PIA plans to approach the UK's Department for Transport (DfT) for UK route resumption, as EASA clearance is a prerequisite for their decision," PIA spokesman Abdullah Hafeez Khan told Reuters.

EASA and UK authorities suspended permission for PIA to operate in the region after Pakistan began investigating the validity of pilots' licenses following a deadly plane crash that killed 97 people.

Khan said the airline expects to resume flights to Europe, starting with

Paris, within the next three to four weeks.

Once PIA gets approval for UK flights, Khan said London, Manchester, and Birmingham would be the most sought-after destinations.

PIA and the government, which is aiming to sell a 60 percent stake in the carrier, had urged EASA to lift the ban, even provisionally. The ban cost the airline 40 billion rupees (\$144 million) annually in revenue.

Khan said the company has sufficient cash flow to add new routes. Decisions on leasing new aircraft will be made after the government finalizes privatization discussions, he said.

The loss-making national carrier has a 23 percent stake in Pakistan's domestic aviation market, but its 34-plane fleet can't compete with Middle Eastern carriers which hold a 60 percent market share, due to a lack of direct flights, despite having agreements with 87 countries and key landing slots.

The government's attempt to privatize the airline fell flat when it received only a single offer, well below its asking price.

"With Europe now, and upcoming UK routes, we anticipate increased revenue potential and hence a rise in PIA's value during the privatization process," Khan said.

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