

January - March 2026

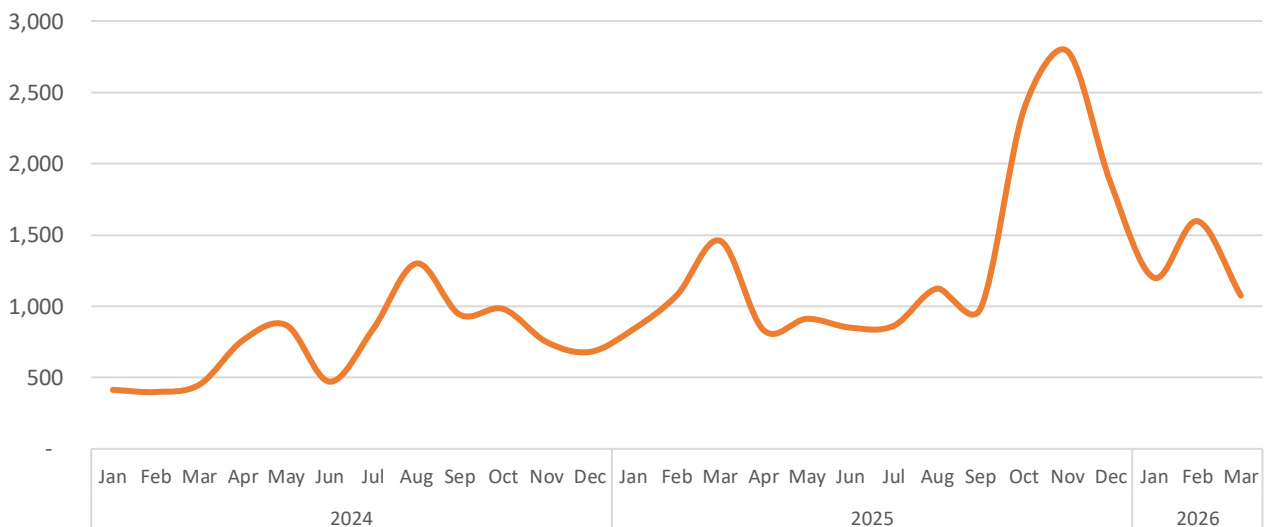
Migration Trends and Analysis: Pakistan

Migrant Resource Centres in Pakistan

This migration trends analysis includes analytical considerations from data generated by the [Migrant Resource Centres in Pakistan](#). With over 240 million people, Pakistan is world's fifth most populous country¹. In terms of migration trends, it is an important country of origin, transit and destination for migrants. This report focuses on highlights and important information on trends/patterns and insights regarding the migration and mobility of potential, current or returning migrants within the covered period, incorporating references from previous quarters ensuring comparability and providing a comprehensive annual perspective.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

- MRCs in Pakistan **reached 2.9 million people** through expanded digital outreach and intensified on-the-ground engagement during the first quarter of the year.
- **Pre-Departure Orientation Sessions (PDOS)** served as a cornerstone of structured engagement, reaching **43,801 outgoing emigrants** - equivalent to 36% of the total number of PDOS participants recorded in the previous year (121,762) within just three months.
- During this quarter, **3,281 enquiries** were recorded, **with 52.5% related to employment opportunities abroad**. The Gulf region remained the leading destination, followed by Europe.
- While the Gulf countries are a primary destination for semi-skilled workers, MRCs observed a notable and growing shift toward European Union and Central Asian countries for both employment and educational opportunities.
- In March 2026, regional airspace closures across the Middle East caused significant flight cancellations, stranding passengers and disrupting travel for Pakistani emigrants.



Reached (counselled) prospective emigrants through MRCs over the past three years, excluding social media

¹ United Nations Population Fund: World Population Dashboard -Pakistan | United Nations Population Fund (unfpa.org)

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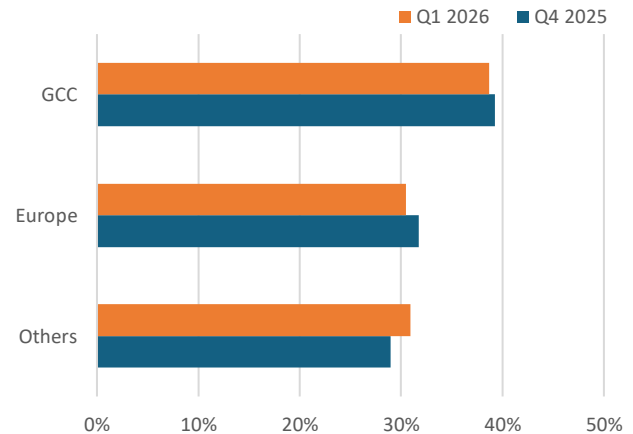
ENQUIRIES AND EMERGING TRENDS

Labour migration remained the dominant driver of mobility during the first quarter of 2026. Out of **3,281 enquiries** received by the Migrant Resource Centres (MRCs), more than half (52.5%) were about **working abroad**, making it the largest category. Most of these enquiries came from Islamabad (763 cases) and Peshawar (572 cases), followed by Lahore (386 cases).

Out of all enquiries, **2,059 were about specific destinations**. Among these, the Gulf region was the most popular (39%), followed by Europe (30%). The remaining 31% were about other parts of the world.

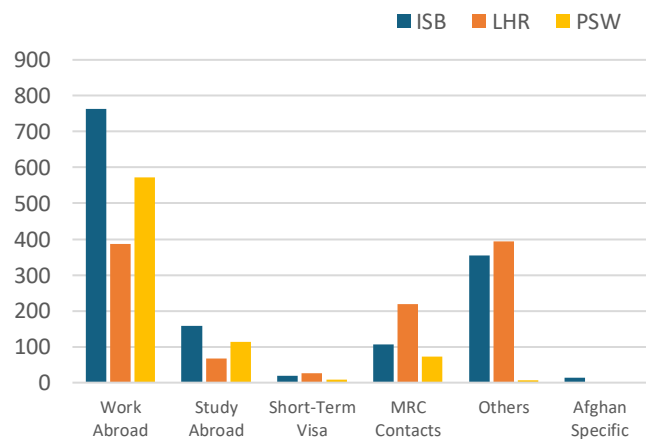
For many years, **Gulf countries (GCC) have remained the primary destination** for Pakistani workers, particularly Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. This pattern continues to dominate overall labour migration flows. However, recent trends suggest some short-term fluctuations within GCC destinations, with variations in recruitment levels between Saudi Arabia and the UAE. These shifts are influenced by changing labour market conditions, evolving visa policies, and regulatory tightening across Gulf states, including labour nationalisation programmes and stricter screening processes².

While traditional GCC countries such as Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, and Oman remained the backbone for semi-skilled and construction labour, interest in European Union destinations surged significantly. Germany, Italy, Greece, Poland, Romania, Portugal, Spain, Finland, and Croatia were consistently cited as top preferences for both work and study. At the same time, Central Asian and Eastern European countries



Geo-specific enquiries, Q1 2026 vs Q4 2025

such as Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Belarus emerged as new destinations for semi-skilled and skilled workers. Notably, clients also expressed interest in less typical countries like Siberia, Latvia, Cambodia, Malta, and Nigeria, a **trend often correlated with higher fraud risks**. The case of Cambodia has in particular been a major concern as labour migrants from Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia are being lured into large-scale human trafficking networks in Cambodia especially in the borders with Thailand



Categories of enquiries by MRC, Q1 2026

² <https://www.nation.com.pk/01-Apr-2026/pakistani-workforce-shifts-toward-uae-amid-changing-gulf-job-trends>



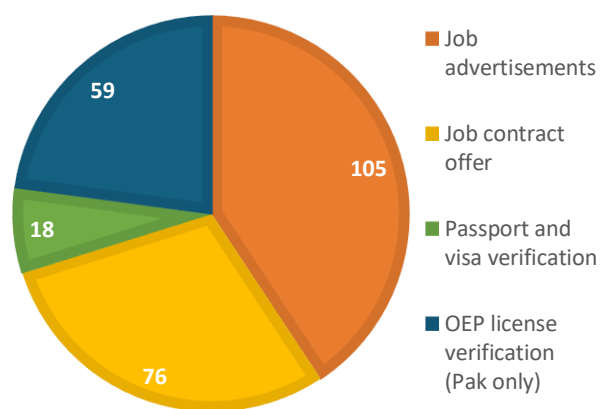
and ‘trafficking for forced criminality,’ where they are coerced into perpetrating online scams. At least 5 Pakistanis have sought counselling and advice on this situation.

The types of enquiries received by MRCs also show that migration is **no longer a simple, straightforward process driven only by the need for jobs**. Instead, it is becoming more complex, **shaped by changes in labour markets, government policies, and regional instability**.

Looking at monthly trends, in January most people were asking for **general information** about legal pathways and destinations. In February, the focus shifted to **checking job offers, understanding visa procedures, and raising complaints**. By March, people were dealing with more practical issues like **visa delays, employment contracts, and travel arrangements** (possibly influenced by regional tensions). When compared with Q4 2025, these patterns suggest an emerging shift toward more cautious and informed decision-making. Whereas the previous quarter reflected growing engagement with safe and legal migration pathways and skills development, Q1 2026 demonstrates a transition from information-seeking to verification and implementation. The consistently low levels of irregular migration enquiries across both periods further reinforce this trend. Although not conclusive, this suggests that migrants are becoming more informed and cautious, and are increasingly using official channels such as the Protectorate of Emigrants, the Bureau of Emigration, and MRC services.

MRC counsellors also reported a clear shift in the **type of emigration** taking place, which is becoming more focused on skills and professional qualifications. Highly skilled workers, especially from Lahore and Islamabad, were increasingly looking toward the UK, Germany, Australia, and

East Asia. They were mainly applying for jobs in healthcare, IT, engineering, and research. In parallel, Ireland is increasingly being discussed as an emerging destination for Pakistani skilled labour, particularly in healthcare, ICT, construction, and engineering. However, current indications suggest this relates to Ireland’s existing employment permit system for eligible non-EEA workers, rather than a confirmed Pakistan-specific labour pathway. The trend should be monitored closely, with emphasis on official guidance and verified recruitment channels.



Verified cases by MRCs,, Q1 2026

At the same time, semi-skilled and low-skilled workers continue to move mostly to the Gulf countries, Türkiye, and parts of Europe. There is also growing demand for language certificates (such as German and Korean), technical qualifications, and digital skills like cybersecurity and cloud computing. This shows a clear move toward a system where having recognised skills and certifications is essential for working abroad.

However, **risks linked to fraud and irregular migration** are still a serious concern. High numbers of verification requests (59 in January,



137 in February, and 62 in March) and reports of **irregular migration routes to countries like Latvia, Cambodia, and Uzbekistan** show that vulnerabilities remain. While there are signs of improved behaviour among migrants such as greater verification of documents, more questioning of high-cost job offers, and increased use of official channels to report problems, significant gaps remain in pre-departure preparation. MRC data indicates that only around **5% of emigrants reviewed their employment contracts** before departure. Case records from March further highlight ongoing challenges, including job loss abroad, detention, and limited awareness of legal rights. This gap between increased awareness and weak practical preparation continues to expose many emigrants to exploitation, particularly in lower-skilled employment.

In March 2026, a major regional security escalation led to widespread airspace closures across the Middle East, including the UAE and Qatar, resulting in thousands of flight cancellations and severe disruption at major hubs such as Dubai and Doha. At the peak of the crisis, over 20,000 flights were cancelled across the region, and Gulf airports remained partially or fully closed for several days, leaving large numbers of passengers stranded and prompting government-led repatriation efforts. These disruptions significantly reduced flight activity on key Gulf corridors and forced airlines to reroute operations through alternative airspaces, contributing to heightened uncertainty among

REACH

Outreach in Q1 2026 continued the upward trend seen throughout 2025, **reaching approximately**

Pakistani emigrants and travellers holding visas or in transit.

This situation highlights how dependent Pakistan's migration system is on Gulf labour markets and transit routes, and how quickly geopolitical tensions can disrupt mobility. It also reflects growing tensions between Pakistan and the UAE and tighter visa rules, which are not yet causing large-scale returns but are increasing uncertainty and pressure on migrants³.

At the same time, Pakistan continues to face migration-related pressures linked to its border with Afghanistan, including the management of Afghan refugee populations and periodic returns or deportations. Alongside this, the country remains heavily dependent on outward labour migration, particularly to Gulf states, which supports domestic income through remittances.

Together, these dynamics create a dual migration system in which Pakistan must both facilitate outward labour mobility and manage inward population movements. This can place pressure on domestic labour markets, particularly if return migration increases faster than the economy can absorb additional workers. While remittances remain relatively stable overall, they could become more volatile if external labour demand shifts or if migration policies in destination countries change. However, the scale of these effects depends on broader regional stability and economic conditions, and does not necessarily imply immediate or simultaneous disruption across all channels.

2.9 million people. This represents a significant increase compared to both the previous quarter and the same period last year. Compared to Q4

³ <https://propakistani.pk/2026/02/11/more-than-38000-pakistanis-deported-from-gulf-countries-in-2025>



2025 (2.27 million reach), outreach in Q1 2026 increased by approximately **27.8%**, reflecting continued expansion. When compared to Q1 2025 (1.04 million reach), outreach has increased by around 178% year-on-year, more than doubling over the past 12 months.

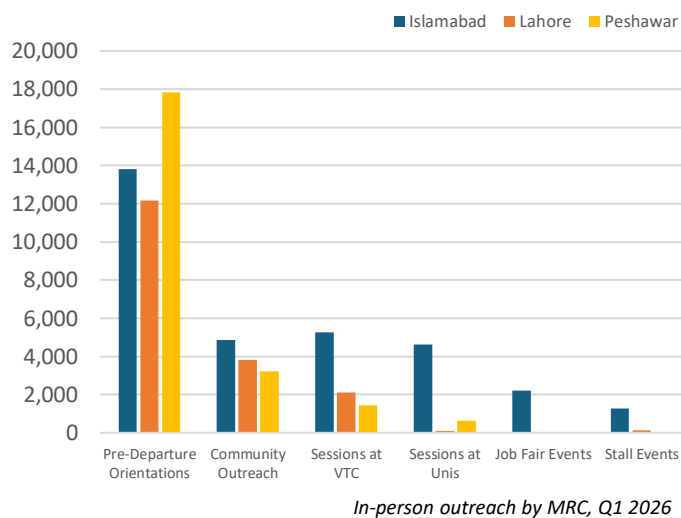
In Q1 2026, the MRCs in Pakistan reached more than **2.5 million people** through digital platforms, alongside roughly **339,000 people through offline communication channels** and about **73,000 through direct outreach** activities. Overall, outreach during the quarter shows a continued reliance on social media as the main channel, supported by targeted in-person engagement and traditional information-sharing tools.

Digital outreach remained the strongest driver of reach. Facebook alone accounted for just over 2.04 million people reached, making it the central platform for awareness campaigns. Instagram followed with around 322,000 people reached, while YouTube contributed close to 118,000. Smaller contributions came from Twitter and WhatsApp, and TikTok remained rather limited.

Alongside digital activity, offline communication continued to play an important supporting role. In total, 339,282 people were reached through non-digital channels. This included around 60,000 through IEC materials, nearly 15,000 through posters and information boards, and over 241,000 through news articles and media coverage. These channels helped extend the reach of migration messaging beyond online audiences and into broader public spaces.

Direct, face-to-face outreach also remained a key part of the programme. Across the three cities, MRCs reached 73,440 individuals through

structured engagement activities. The largest share (60%) came from pre-departure briefings, which reached 43,803 prospective emigrants, continuing to serve as the main platform for preparing people before emigration. Outreach in TVET and vocational institutions engaged 8,827



participants, while universities reached 5,328 students, helping to strengthen awareness among younger and education-based audiences. Additional engagement came through MRC stalls and public events, as well as job fairs, which together added over 3,500 participants, linking awareness with employment and skills opportunities.

Overall, MRCs continued to rely on digital platforms, especially Facebook, to deliver large-scale reach, while offline communication and direct outreach ensured that messaging is reinforced through trusted, in-person channels. The combination of these approaches helped maintain both scale and depth in outreach, with pre-departure briefings continuing to anchor direct engagement with prospective emigrants.

Engagement with Emigrants

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Engagement in Q1 2026 showed a moderation in counselling activity following the exceptionally high volumes recorded in Q4 2025, while still maintaining a solid level of demand for migration support services. A total of 3,872 one-on-one counselling sessions were delivered between January and March 2026. Monthly trends within the quarter indicate that February was the most active month with 1,597 sessions, followed by January with 1,200, before easing to 1,075 in March. This pattern suggests that while demand remained steady at the start of the year, it gradually tapered off toward the end of the quarter.

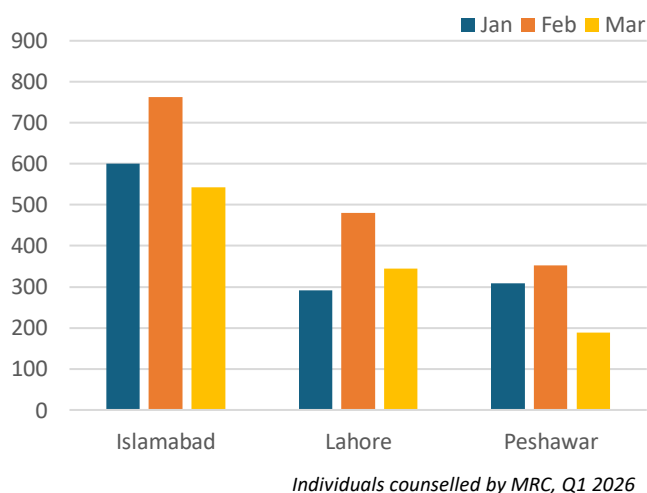
Across locations, Islamabad continued to account for the largest share of counselling sessions, delivering 1,905 sessions over the quarter, followed by Lahore with 1,117 and Peshawar with 850. Islamabad's consistently higher volume aligns with patterns observed in previous periods, including Q4 2025, where it also saw high demand for counselling by aspirant emigrants.

A total of **43,803 outgoing emigrants** were sensitised through **220 Pre-Departure Orientation Sessions (PDOS)** delivered across the three MRCs during Q1 2026, covering safe and regular migration pathways, employment rights and responsibilities, contractual obligations, host country regulations, and available complaint mechanisms. Of the total participants, 99% (43,179 individuals) were male, while only 624 were female, underscoring a significant gender imbalance in participation that mirrors broader patterns in labour migration from Pakistan.

Engagement with clients and the PDOS revealed several recurring categories of inquiry during this period. The most common queries revolved around overseas employment procedures (visa steps, work permits, Protector registration); document and agent verification (job ads,

contracts, OEP legitimacy); study abroad and scholarships (admissions, funding, language requirements for Germany, Finland, Canada, and beyond); complaint mechanisms (reporting fraud and employer abuses to FIA, BEOE, or CWAs); and return/reintegration (re-entry bans, passport issues, and psychosocial support for deportees).

During the same period, **258 cases were verified** by MRCs, compared to 194 cases in Q4 2025, reflecting a notable increase in verification activity in the current quarter. Islamabad accounted for 57% of verified cases, followed by Lahore at 34% and Peshawar at 9%, indicating a more balanced distribution across locations compared to the previous quarter, when Islamabad represented a significantly larger share of verifications. The verifications in Q1 2026 included 105 job advertisements, 76 job contracts and offers, and 18 visa cases, while 59 Overseas Employment Promoter (OEP) licenses were processed, slightly higher than the 50 licenses handled in Q4 2025. This increase in verification and regulatory support activities suggests a continued strengthening of oversight mechanisms.



Fraudulent migration schemes continued to target prospective migrants through multiple channels, including fake job advertisements on WhatsApp and Facebook, high-cost visa scams, confusion around so-called “Azad visas,” and fraudulent scholarship emails impersonating programmes such as Erasmus+ and DAAD. A fraudulent scheme targeting Afghan refugees awaiting visas to third countries was also

observed, in which victims received fake approval emails allegedly from the French Embassy in Islamabad. In response, MRCs actively supported verification and awareness-raising by guiding clients on legitimate recruitment channels, validating job offers and migration pathways, and strengthening counselling to help individuals identify and avoid scams before making financial commitments.

Contact information:

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