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Report - Roundtable

“Delegation from All Party Parliamentary Group on Kashmir (APPKG), London”

September 19, 2018



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Pictures of the Event





Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI) hosted a Roundtable on September 19, 2018, with a 5-member delegation from All Party Parliamentary Group on Kashmir (APPKG), London. The group was in Pakistan to discuss the situation in Kashmir and to strengthen APPKG's efforts to bring a parliamentary motion to put pressure on India. The members of the delegation included: Mr. Christopher Leslie, Member British Parliament and Chairman APPKG, Ms. Anthea McIntyre, Member European Parliament; Mr. Imran Hussain, Member British Parliament; Mr. Faisal Rashid, Member British Parliament; and Mr. Raja Najabat, Chairman, Jammu and Kashmir self-determination movement.

Participants at the roundtable included: Barrister Sultan Mahmood Chaudhry, Former Prime Minister, Azad Jammu and Kashmir; Ambassador (Retd) Fauzia Nasreen; Ambassador (Retd) Ashraf Jehangir Qazi; Ambassador (Retd) Aziz Ahmed Khan; Dr. Rukhsana Qamber, President, Institute of Regional Studies (IRS); Mr. Khalid Rahim, Member Advisory Board, Center for Global and Strategic Studies (CGSS); Mr. Tauqeer Ahmad, Member Advisory Board, Center for Global and Strategic Studies (CGSS); Mr. Mohammad Farooq Rehmani, Senior Leader, All Parties Hurriyat Conference (APHC); Shaikh Tajjamul Islam, Director, Kashmir Media Service; Mr. Mohammad Rafiq Dar, Spokesperson, Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front; Ms. Mushaal Hussein Mullick, Chairperson, Peace & Culture Organization; and Mr. Shahras Asim, Director Kashmir, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA).

Welcoming the guests, Director General ISSI, Ambassador (Retd) Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry said that the security situation in Kashmir is a matter of constant concern and the Kashmiris have been waiting for the last seven decades for resolution of the dispute as promised to them by the United Nations (UN). However, the Indian government has always frustrated every attempt to find a solution. He said that the most serious situation right now is concerning the human rights of the Kashmiris which are being continuously violated with no regard to United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UNHCR). The recent report by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights documents the systematic human rights violations by the Indian armed forces. Furthermore, the report calls for a commission of inquiry as the Indian government was quick to reject the report, denying human rights violations in Indian Occupied Kashmir (IOK).

Describing his interaction with the people of his constituency Mr. Christopher Leslie said that there are many people in Nottingham who always talk to him about the Kashmir issue. He said that Kashmir is a region which should be cherished by the entire world for its natural beauty and resources. But sadly, it is an area where questions on human rights abuses were raised decade after decade of conflict. The purpose of APPKG's visit is not only to see the on-ground situation, but also produce a report about the major findings related to the statutory legal position, particularly on the Indian side of the Line of Control (LOC) in terms of security and legislation that gives extra judicial powers to Indian armed forces. He termed hearing the testimony of a number of affected individuals as one of the most significant aspects of this visit. He said that there are families who have been separated, relatives of individuals who have been incarcerated or disappeared. He said that he spoke with four individual who have been victims of indiscriminate shelling and sniper attacks. He described the current situation as very tragic. He added that their group had tried to contact the Indian High Commissioner in the UK on many occasions to invite him and give them evidence, but the invitation has not been taken up.

He expressed his gratitude for the government of Pakistan which facilitated a number of visits by different delegations. He also expressed his hope of talking with other British colleagues about this intractable issue which does not need another or two decades of heart wrenching and hand-wringing. Lastly, he stressed on entering into the phase where one should stop doing pure analysis and start focusing on the solutions which are the most difficult. He also said that he will welcome any effort by the people at the table in identifying the opportunities that should be taken up by APPKG to help move away from this stalemate scenario.

Barrister Sultan Mahmood Chaudhry said that this roundtable is timely as a lot of atrocities are being committed at the moment in Indian Occupied Kashmir, especially now since the Indian government is aiming to delete section 35A of its constitution. He highlighted that the significant development is that Prime Minister of Pakistan Mr. Imran Khan, in his victory speech, offered talks to India very openly. He emphasized the need to have a conducive environment, and that India must immediately stop all the atrocities in IOK and give dialogue a chance. Kashmiris, he said, will welcome this initiative and like to be included at some stage in the dialogue process. Numbers of initiatives were taken to gather Kashmiris in Islamabad, but the Indian government did not allow them to travel. Praising the efforts of British parliamentarians, he said that friends

in British Parliament are working very hard for passing resolutions on Kashmir. He also expressed hope that the MPs would raise their voices against the recent Indian atrocities which have reached new heights. The British government is also planning to organize a conference which would include all the stakeholders. Furthermore, one delegation from the British parliament will go to UN and remind the UN Secretary-General about the resolutions passed by the UN Security Council (UNSC).

Mr. Imran Hussain highlighted the main strategic issues related to Kashmir. First is the issue of self-determination which is the absolute legal right not the demand of the Kashmiri people. Secondly, there exist a lot of sensitivities in the whole region. Both India and Pakistan are nuclear powers and it does not take much to escalate tensions to a very serious level. In this context, the main question is why this issue has not received more involvement of the international community? Also, a major reason is the growing economic power of India. The international community wants a peaceful resolution of the issue, but considers this dispute as a bilateral issue between India and Pakistan, and, there are a lot of other national and international factors before the international community. But this detachment is a fatal mistake because it is not in the interest of the international community that the Kashmir issue remains unresolved because it is damaging international peace, economy, trade and geographic relations. South Asia is a strategically placed region and the dispute over Kashmir will affect the peace and stability of the broader region. He further suggested that the British government have a principle moral and historic obligation to facilitate the resolution. However, the talks must not be bilateral, they must include the sons and daughters of Kashmir. Lastly, he pointed out that the recent UN report regarding the human right violations in Kashmir is not new. All the reported facts are already well-documented at the international stage. UN should now work for the solution and its inability to find a solution will make the organization weak. The Indian Armed Forces Special Powers Act and Public Safety Act are the legislations that are direct contravention of international law. When the armed forces have judicial, moral and political impunity, injustice will happen.

Describing her surprise on the rejection of visa by the Belgium government, Member of European Parliament Anthea McIntyre said that she had raised the Kashmir issue with EU delegation because democratically elected body such as the European Parliament cannot afford such situations. It will weaken democracy in Europe. It is really important for the representatives

of 28-member countries to hear directly from the Kashmiri people. Talking from the EU perspective, she said that EU should widen its network. Although there are a lot of friends of Kashmir in EU, but many of them are inactive. So, the objective of UK is to widen this network in EU and encourage other colleagues to understand the issues and take up the course of action. Apart from Brexit, one of the most important issues is UK's and EU's endeavor to secure trade agreements with other countries such as India. But international order cannot accept such deals at any price, and especially because the price of human rights abuses is too high. The world must say to India that "no doubt you are a growing economy and big democracy but the human rights abuses in Kashmir are staining your image". She said that the most impressive element of this firsthand experience is the courage, dignity, determination of the Kashmiri people and their resolve for the peaceful settlement of the dispute. If other people of the world become like Kashmiris, the world would be a much better place. She concluded with a quote by Mahatma Gandhi "be the change you want to see in the world".

According to Mr. Faisal Rashid, the most important thing is to keep this issue alive through speeches, debates, seminars, and conferences. He said that they are looking forward to the debate in the British Parliament in October and would try to put pressure on the British government to have a dialogue with India.

Raja Najabat Hussain while describing the objective of his organization said that the movement is working with both houses and parliamentary groups in the British Parliament. In the last six years, the movement has achieved six debates, and seven question and answers. EU has also started investigation of the human rights abuses in Kashmir and will complete its report in October. The Kashmiris are sacrificing in the Valley and the Kashmiri Diasporas are doing their diplomatic job voluntarily wherever they can reach. Resultantly, more than 40 parliamentarians from EU and 70 from the British Parliament are now members of Friends of Kashmir.

Mr. Muhammad Farooq Rehmani from All Parties Hurriyat Conference acknowledged the efforts of the APPKG and the role being played by the ISSI. Pakistan and India, he said, have apparently exhausted all options of conflict resolution, have had wars, back-door diplomacy, and Track-II diplomacy, but one main option which both have missed is the solution by the Kashmiri people. They only do bilateral talks and never ask the Kashmiri people about their tendencies,

role and wishes. So, there is a big gap between their efforts and words. He said that the people of Kashmir are not disappointed, but Kashmiris in IOK have faced hell for the last 70 years which has destroyed Kashmiri traditions, culture, politics, and economy. Pakistan really respects the wishes of the Kashmiri people, but why has the international community been silent? He suggested bringing the Kashmiris on to the table and starting a trilateral dialogue, and address the ways in which they want to resolve the issue. The narrative of Kashmiris is most important and the right of self-determination is at the heart of it. This right has been pledged to them both by the UN, and by India. Kashmiri people aspire for peace in the region and which is directly linked with international peace and stability.

Ms. Mushaal Hussein Mullick thanked the delegation for expressing solidarity with the people of Kashmir. Recollecting on her personal experiences of abuse and harassment at the hands of Indian forces, Ms. Mullick stated that the people of Kashmir are following the path of non-violence through a peaceful freedom movement and even then they are facing the wrath of the Indian Armed Forces. Highlighting the atrocities committed by Indian armed forces, she stated that even the dead bodies of Kashmiri people are not spared and Kashmir has the highest ratio of widows. She pointed out that most of the crimes committed by the Indian forces go unreported as the women victims feel ashamed while reporting cases of rape and torture. Ms. Mullick pointed out that recently a little girl, Asifa was brutally raped in a temple. This incident was backed by the BJP and pro-rapist rallies were taken out in India. She stated that these crimes committed by the Indian armed forces need to be projected in front of the world and the international community must expose India's record of human rights violations. She said that people of Kashmir are suffering and their daily life has been disrupted. Universities, colleges, and schools remain closed most of the year and students drop out of schools due to fear of being targeted by the Indian forces. She highlighted that resolving the Kashmir issue is in the interest of the international community because peace and stability in Kashmir will have a knock-off effect for peace and stability of the entire region. She said that global peace and economics go hand in hand and economies cannot grow unless there is peace and stability in the region.

Ambassador (Retd) Ashraf Jahangir Qazi agreed with Mushaal Mullick and stated that the atrocities committed by the Indian armed forces in IOK should be put forward in front of the world. He was of the opinion that UN resolutions alone cannot deliver a settlement of the

Kashmir issue, but they are essential for the credibility of Pakistan's position on the Kashmir issue and Pakistan remains a party to the dispute as a result of these resolutions. They are a basis on which international community recognizes the rights of the Kashmiri people and refuses Indian claim of Kashmir having acceded to India. Ambassador Qazi insisted that in order to start dialogue with India, there cannot be a pre condition that the two parties talking to each other should change their position before participating in the dialogue. India and Pakistan will have to provide a context within which a settlement can be reached. He pointed out that India considers Kashmiris as part of India, and therefore cannot be a party in the dialogue process. However, trilateral dialogue can be conducted with sequential series of bilateral talks. He stressed that the dialogue needs to move forward as the two nuclear powers cannot afford to have a failed rounds of talks. The age old issue of self-determination needs to be addressed on urgent basis in order to avoid the danger of a likely nuclear conflict. He stressed that if we can get the dialogue going, then we need to address the core interest of both countries. Pakistan's core interest is Kashmir, while Indian core interests are based on the elimination of terrorism emanating from Pakistan leading to problems in Indian Occupied Kashmir. Both these interests are mutually exclusive narratives. He was optimistic that the new government in Pakistan is looking at things through a different lens and hence, possibilities of a fresh start of dialogue can emerge through which we can address each other's core interests. Ambassador Qazi stressed that the modalities should be designed in such a way that are acceptable to all the parties and especially involve the Kashmiri people so that a settlement according to the wishes of Kashmiri people can be achieved.

Ambassador (Retd) Aziz Ahmed Khan suggested that a two-step approach needs to be adopted; Firstly the international community needs to impress upon the Indian government to stop the atrocities in Indian Occupied Kashmir, and secondly, start a process of multiple series of dialogue between India, Pakistan and Kashmiris. Ambassador Aziz also highlighted that despite the fact that the sensitivities in the region are well-documented and well-known, this issue has not received enough attention by the international community and media. He said that being champions of human rights, the western countries should not remain silent on the issue of Kashmir. He was of the view that it is necessary to have a dialogue with all the stakeholders of the conflict in order to create an environment in which a final settlement can be reached.

Ambassador (Retd) Fauzia Nasreen was of the view that development perspective needs to be kept in mind while looking for the possible solution of Kashmir issue. She stressed that all possibilities of creating a shared vision for the future in which economic benefits and connectivity prospects can be exploited need to be considered while taking the aspirations of Kashmir people into account.

Mr. Tauqeer Ahmad said that in his view, the only way to resolve the Kashmir issue is that the world community should put pressure on India to resolve this issue.

Dr. Rukhsana Qamber pointed out that the members of the British Parliament have a principled obligation to facilitate talks in a conducive environment and bring peace to the region. Mentioning Prime Minister Imran Khan's victory speech in which he invited India for talks, Dr. Qamber optimistically stated that it has given a new hope to the peace process between India and Pakistan.

Mohammad Rafiq Dar shared his personal experiences of solitary confinement and torture inflicted on him by the Indian armed forces. He highlighted that Kashmiris are fighting for their right to self-determination and national freedom. Mr. Dar stated that the actual problem is that Kashmiris are not being treated as the masters of their own soil and fate. All the bilateral dialogues so far have taken place between India and Pakistan which excluded the Kashmiri leaders and hence, have failed to resolve the decades old Kashmir issue. He was of the view that unless true representatives of Kashmir are not included in the dialogue process, no sustainable results can be achieved. He thanked Pakistan for extending support for the Kashmiri cause. He suggested that the international community should engage in dialogue with the Kashmiri people as was the case till 1998. Recalling the late 1990s, he stated that the international community (especially US and UK) persuaded JKLF to give peace a chance after which JKLF renounced militancy, but in return Indian armed forces killed more than 600 Kashmiri people. He was of the opinion that the international community should intervene and resume its connection with the Kashmiri leadership for a peaceful resolution of the Kashmir issue.

The meeting concluded with a vote of thanks by the Director General, Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad, Ambassador (Retd) Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry.