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Report - Roundtable Discussion
with
"Former Norwegian Prime Minister, Founder and Executive Chair of the Oslo Centre, Mr. Kjell Magne Bondevik"

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Pictures of the Event

The Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI) hosted a Roundtable Discussion on September 26, 2018, with Mr. Kjell Magne Bondevik, former Norwegian Prime Minister and Founder and Executive Chair of the Oslo Centre.

The participants at the roundtable included: Ambassador (Retd) Fauzia Nasreen; Ambassador (Retd) Aziz Ahmed Khan; Lt. General (Retd) Talat Masood, Dr. Rukhsana Qamber, President, Institute of Regional Studies (IRS); Ms. Maryam Nazir, Islamabad Policy and Research Institute (IPRI); Mr. Ashfaq Ahmad Gondal, former Secretary Information; Mr. Ahmed Quraishi, CEO Youth Forum for Kashmir; Mr. Muhammad Farooq Rehmani, Chairman, Jammu and Kashmir People's Freedom League; Ms. Maryum Maqsood, Centre for Pakistan and Gulf Studies; Mr. Ershad Mehmood, Columnist; Ms. Shaista Safi, Youth Forum for Kashmir.

Welcoming the speaker and guests, Chairman ISSI, Ambassador (Retd) Khalid Mahmood said that Mr. Kjell Magne Bondevik has a keen interest in peace and development and is also working for the peaceful settlement of Kashmir dispute. He has visited India, especially the Indian-held Kashmir, and has direct knowledge about the on-going situation in Kashmir. Ambassador Mahmood highlighted the cordial ties between Norway and Pakistan, and said that security situation in Kashmir is a matter of constant concern and the Kashmiris have been waiting for past seven decades for the resolution of this dispute as promised to them by the United Nations. He said that the most serious situation right now is with regards to the human rights of the Kashmiris, which are being continuously violated with no regard to United Nations resolutions, nor its declarations on universal Human Rights. He invited Mr. Kjell Magne Bondevik to share his views and the approach that the international community should adopt in order to resolve this conflict.

Addressing the gathering, Mr. Kjell Magne Bondevik stated that peace can only be achieved if there is respect for human rights and a strong democracy. Without a strong democracy, sooner or later there will be an uprising. Quoting the UN Declaration on Human Rights, he said that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and with certain basic rights. In fact, the latter is a consequence of human dignity and any abuses of human rights are encroachments on human dignity. He stressed that democracy and human rights are closely linked, and any abuses of human rights will lead to an uprising and generate violent conflicts. Mr. Kjell highlighted that

the principles of human rights are rooted and entrenched in the Enlightenment movement, American Declaration of Independence, Anti-colonialist movement and Post Nazi catalyst in Europe. Yet, this thinking also has roots in Chinese philosophy and in religious traditions, so it is not specifically a western idea.

He stressed that we share important common values such as the idea of human dignity, peace, and justice across religious differences. He suggested that these common values should be used to mobilize and make efforts for reconciliation in order to establish peace in conflict zones. He admitted that there have been occasions where the western world has represented a double standard that is not promoting peace. He also expressed concern over the current international environment and lamented on the worsening security system.

Mr. Bondevik informed the participants regarding the UN efforts in ending poverty and ensuring better living standards. He stated that the 8 Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) introduced by UN in 2000 helped achieving notable success in all the areas especially education, ending hunger and extreme poverty, and improving maternal health. He said that today, there is less extreme poverty, infant and maternal mortality and increased levels of literacy at the global level. In 2015, UN announced 17 SDGs to be achieved by 2030. He appreciated Malala Yousafzai's efforts and stated that she is a real advocate for girls' education.

Mr. Bondevik's remarks were followed by a question and answer session.

Asked about the current mood in New Delhi with regard to resolving the Kashmir issue, Mr. Bondevik responded that he considered Kashmir a bilateral issue. He said that the Indians claim that actually there are violent groups attacking Indian military and personnel, which, India believes, is perpetrated by Pakistan. However, he said that in his view, the main thing is that the two countries must come to the negotiating table.

When his attention was directed to the dual standards that India is upholding with regard to democracy and human rights, Mr. Bondevik said that despite India's cherished claims of being the world's largest democracy, no minority is safe there. He pointed out that democracy and human rights go hand in hand.

When reminded that from many aspects, Kashmir is not only an issue of human rights but of a state perpetuating terrorism, and asked how can we pressure UN to implement its resolutions, Mr. Bondevik replied that with respect to UN, he did believe that it needs to work more actively on this issue. However, OHCHR's recent report on human rights abuses in Kashmir is an appreciable effort.

To another query whether there is any likelihood of India's friends pressuring it to end the impasse on Kashmir, Mr. Bondevik answered that he was doubtful as India is sensitive about international pressure on Kashmir. However, he emphasized, we would never give up.

A query was raised about response of the Indian civil society and whether its opinion is strong enough to shape the Kashmir policy of the Indian government? Mr. Kjell responded that he was in frequent contact with people in India, especially those who have a positive approach towards resolving the Kashmir issue. He informed the participants that he often spoke to Mani Shankar Iyer and many other thinkers and statesmen.

When reminded of the sufferings of the Kashmiri and enquired why the UN and other human rights organizations fail to give a much-needed humane response, Mr. Bondevik answered that while he sees clear contradictions but, to be honest, Kashmir is also a question of strategic interests of Pakistan and India.

Concluding the discussion, Ambassador Khalid Mahmood said that Kashmir is not a bilateral issue but a question of human rights. According to the UN Charter, there are many other methods and modalities through which this protracted issue could be resolved. We are open to all of them. We can come to the negotiating table and resolve this conflict according to UN resolutions. Alluding to the responsibility of international community to do more on Kashmir, he quoted Martin Luther King: "The ultimate tragedy is not the oppression and tyranny of the cruel but silence of the good people."