



COVID-19 AND REPRESSION IN INDIAN OCCUPIED KASHMIR

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



Even as the COVID- 19 pandemic spread to India, the population of 12.5 million (2011 Census) people in Indian occupied Kashmir (IOK) were already under a prolonged lockdown, suffering the travails of curfew imposed by the Indian government back in August 2019. Now, along with the curfew, Kashmiris have also been further locked down by the coronavirus. As per Ministry of Health India, there were total 300 confirmed coronavirus cases on April 16, 2020 in Indian Occupied Kashmir.¹

The repression in the form of curfew in the Valley puts doctors there in a bind. The Indian government has threatened local doctors, warning that criticism of “government efforts to control pandemic” in “uncalled for media reports” could get them sent to prison.² This order came after doctors in the Kashmir Valley expressed their concern over poor infrastructure and shortage of manpower and equipment.

Despite lack of ventilators, the government-run hospital in Kashmir actually returned six ventilators to an NGO, citing a lack of space, beds, and staff as a reason.³ Contrary to the move, the government

¹ Ministry of Health India, <https://www.mohfw.gov.in/>

² Puja Changoiwala, *The Wire India*, April 04, 2020, <https://thewire.in/rights/covid-19-government-threatens-kashmir-doctors-with-strict-action-for-media-leaks>

³ Outlook Magazine India, https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/india-news-kashmir-hospital-returns-6-ventilators-to-ngo-due-to-lack-of-space-beds-staff/350393?utm_source=amp&utm_medium=tw&utm_campaign=amp

then ordered 400 ventilators more.⁴ At present, IOK has around 100 ventilators, leaving it with just one ventilator per 71,000 people.⁵ Complicating matters, restrictions on internet use in Kashmir are making it far more difficult to have online access to medical advice. Doctors say they are unable even to download critical documents and videos regarding basic COVID-19 safety guidelines and other relevant information, like guidelines for intensive care management. In a novel initiative, three young boys from Kashmir have developed a website — *covidkashmir.org* — for tracking COVID-19 cases in the region. According to the website “Developing and maintaining *covidkashmir.org* on a 2G network has been a difficult task. Not only was it restrictive on our choice of technologies, but also posed a challenge of keeping the website small enough so that it loads on 2G properly.”⁶

Even as the coronavirus pandemic ravages the world, including India, the Indian government has twisted the knife once again by introducing a new domicile law in already bleeding Indian occupied Kashmir. The government of India issued a notification on April 1 changing the decades-old domicile law of the region. It now entitles anyone who has stayed in the region for 15 years to domicile status—10 for central government officials and their children and seven for high school students.

Prime Minister Imran Khan strongly condemned this move by India in his tweet, “We strongly condemn the racist Hindutva Supremacist Modi government’s continuing attempts to illegally alter the demography of IOJK in violation of all international laws & treaties. The new Jammu and Kashmir Reorganization Order 2020 is a clear violation of the 4th Geneva Convention.”⁷

With international focus on battle with COVID-19, the timing of this move by India is clear exploitation and attempts to further its aim of altering the demography of occupied Kashmir. This is also a clear violation of Customary International Humanitarian Law rule 130 according to which: “States may not deport or transfer parts of their own civilian population into a territory they occupy.”⁸ The Organization of Islamic Cooperation has also rejected any attempts made to change the demographic situation of Indian occupied Kashmir. According to a press release by OIC, “The General Secretariat of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) expresses its deep concern over

⁴ Greater Kashmir News Network, Jammu and Kashmir, <https://www.greaterkashmir.com/news/front-page-2/j-400-more-ordered-govt/?amp>

⁵ Outlook Magazine India, https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/india-news-kashmir-hospital-returns-6-ventilators-to-ngo-due-to-lack-of-space-beds-staff/350393?utm_source=amp&utm_medium=tw&utm_campaign=amp
⁶ <https://covidkashmir.org/>

⁷ Official Twitter Handle of Prime Minister Imran Khan, https://twitter.com/ImranKhanPTI/status/1245709751838785536?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Eetweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1245709751838785536&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.dawn.com%2Fnews%2F1545850

⁸ Official Website of Customary International Humanitarian Law, https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/customary-ihl/eng/docs/v1_rul_rule130

the adoption of the 'Jammu and Kashmir Reorganization Order 2020', which may change the demographic structure of Jammu & Kashmir, a disputed territory as recognized by the relevant resolutions of the United Nations Security Council."⁹ This will further compound the already complex situation created by Modi government after August 05, 2019.

In a recent development, the Foundation for Media Professionals in India filed a petition against Indian government to lift internet ban from the Valley. In response, the supreme court of India has asked the Indian government to reply why the internet services are not working especially during the time of pandemic outbreak.¹⁰ The plea by the foundation stated that the restrictive internet speed has made it all but impossible for doctors to use telemedicine and video consultation in the pandemic.

People of Jammu and Kashmir have been under a 'lockdown' since August 2019, suffering the hardships of curfew and brutal repression by Indian security forces. According to a report by Deccan Herald, 10.35% of the population in the IOK lives below the poverty line, with the rural areas holding more poor than the urban centres.¹¹ The prolonged lockdown by the Indian government has already been a "terrible experience" for the people of IOK. The introduction of more unconstitutional changes in the region rather than focusing on the registration of people in IOK in need of social welfare and financial assistance, BJP finds this to be an opportune time to further Hindu majority, and rule in IOK.

India on the whole is by itself under lockdown without any proper strategy, IOK in fact is now under a double lockdown, and where the Indian government seems deliberately impervious to the travails of the people already burdened by curfew. According to few interviews conducted by Deccan Herald¹² in the IOK, it is noted that the poor daily wagers earning around Rs. 300-400 per day are losing all hopes because this consecutive second curfew with double intensity is proving to be the proverbial 'last straw on the camel's back' for the people already deprived of any economic and social activity.

Where COVID-19 has proven to be a challenge for the nations of the world, it has been an opportunity for India to sneak in another insidious move for ensuring a complete Hindu majority in

⁹ Organization of Islamic Cooperation Official Website, https://www.oic-oci.org/topic/?t_id=23309&ref=13973&lan=en

¹⁰ The Economic Times India, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/covid-19-sc-asks-centre-jk-to-reply-on-plea-for-restoration-of-4g-services/articleshow/75062621.cms?from=mdr>

¹¹ COVID-19 lockdown: 1.3 million BPL people in J&K struggle to access basic necessities, "Deccan Herald", April 15, 2020, <https://www.deccanherald.com/national/26-navy-personnel-in-western-naval-command-test-positive-for-coronavirus-827132.html>

¹² Ibid.

IOK. Human rights had already been under stress in IOK, but with international attention diverted from pre COVID issues, the Indian government and authorities are using the pandemic to further demoralize and destroy the will of the people in IOK in hopes of eradicating the Kashmiri freedom struggle.