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Report – Conference

“2nd International Parliamentary Kashmir Conference”

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The Centre for Strategic Perspectives (CSP) at the Institute of Strategic Studies, Islamabad (ISSI) hosted the *2nd International Parliamentary Kashmir Conference* in collaboration with Jammu & Kashmir Self-Determination Movement International (JKSDMI) and Youth Parliament of Pakistan (YPP) to commemorate Kashmir Day on February 4, 2021.

The hybrid event brought together Pakistani policymakers, members of the Pakistan and UK Parliament, Kashmiri activists, and members of the Youth Parliament. Honorable Foreign Minister, Makhdoom Shah Mahmood Qureshi was the chief guest on the occasion. In a virtual address to the participants, the Foreign Minister said that since the brutal Indian siege of occupied Kashmir over the last eighteen months, the support for the people of Kashmir from across the board has been very praiseworthy. He said that the Kashmiri people are very resilient and determined despite the difficult circumstances. India, he said, has been involved in a disinformation campaign against Pakistan and the oppressed Kashmiri people. Pakistan is resolute in its support to the people of Indian occupied Kashmir and the victims of Indian state sponsored barbarism.

Earlier, in his welcome address, Director General, ISSI, Ambassador Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry congratulated the conveners of the conference and appreciated the efforts of all the concerned stakeholders in making efforts to highlight the Kashmir cause globally.

In his opening remarks, the guest of honor, Mr. Shehryar Khan Afridi, Chairman of the Parliamentary Special Committee on Kashmir, said that we are grateful that we have young committed individuals who are keeping this cause alive with their efforts. He said that cultural and demographic terrorism is being carried out by the Indian government since the abrogation of Article 370 and introduction of other related amendments. He said that there was a need to engage parliamentarians and other related stakeholders as parliament, in a democracy, is the voice of the people. He said that as a guarantor of this multilateral issue, the barbarism being carried out by the Indian forces in occupied Kashmir remains a test case for the UN and the international community.

In a video message, Senator Sherry Rehman reiterated that the lockdown in Kashmir since August 2019 strengthens our resolve to show solidarity with the people of Kashmir who continue to suffer at the hands of the Hindutva regime.

Speaking on the occasion over Zoom, several Members of the UK Parliament were unanimous in their views that trade with India will not be acceptable as long as oppression by India in Kashmir continues. All of them condemned the steps taken by India in August 2019 to introduce demographic changes in illegally Indian occupied Jammu and Kashmir.

Glasgow Member of Parliament from the Scottish National Party Alison Taylors said that the UK government has an obligation and a role to play to help the people of Jammu and Kashmir and to realize the goal of self-determination. She was of the view that Kashmir must have a choice over its nation's future, of its people's future and of the direction that it wishes to travel. She further stated that the just rights have been denied to the people of Jammu and Kashmir for far too long. Concluding her remarks, she reiterated her solidarity with the people of Jammu and Kashmir.

Ms. Rebecca Longbaily, contender for the leadership of the Labor Party from Manchester referred to the issue of Kashmir as a tragedy that has been going on for over 70 years and is worsening every day. She was of the view that the British response to the Kashmiri situation has got to be based on the principles of the right of the Kashmiri people who have a distinct historical and cultural identity to decide their own future. Moreover there is a need for the sanctity of international agreements worked out by the United Nations, and the consistent application of human rights standards to reach a peaceful solution to the Kashmir conflict. She applauded the work of the Kashmiri Diaspora in Britain. She further stated that UK has got to do more to keep this issue at the top of the agenda and encourage the UN and all world powers including UK government to ensure that the plebiscite is carried out in Kashmir.

Khalid Mahmood, Member of British Parliament, and shadow Defense Minister MP from Birmingham expressed his solidarity and stated that the issue of the atrocities that have continuously been committed by the horrendous Hindutva government of Prime Minister Modi is of grave concern, and the Modi government is only concerned with the interests of the Hindu community. India is no longer a secular society and no longer a democracy as democracy asks for the opinion of its entire people and represents their religious views and their views as an individual as well. He was of the view that the current government in India has consistently abused human rights and civil liberties of the Kashmiris. Since August 2019 shutdown, the

Indian government has broken every single law in terms of human rights and internal civil liberties and has violated the Geneva convention. He further stated that if the same issue was happening anywhere else, the whole world would have been up in arms. The people of Kashmir are not only physically cut-off from the world, but also virtually and digitally cut-off. He reiterated on the need to re-focus the efforts in two ways: firstly, to press upon the UK government to highlight Indian atrocities, violations of human rights and civil liberties with other countries. The UK government needs to pick and choose who its partners are. Secondly, he said the biggest failure has been the failure of the United Nations as it has been unable to do anything to resolve the Kashmir issue. Moreover, the Geneva Convention which is as old as the Kashmir dispute has failed to perform to resolve the conflict. The Convention is applicable around the globe apart from the Kashmiri people. He was of the view that the issue of Kashmir should not be limited to the UN and should be taken up with the International Criminal Court to prosecute Modi and his government.

Paul Brestro representative of the government party as a co-chairperson of Conservative Friends of Kashmir, and Member of Parliament from Peterborough also shared his views. He stated that the Indian occupied Kashmir is absolutely key to politics in Peterborough. He extended his solidarity to the people of Kashmir and promised on behalf of the Conservative Friends of Kashmir to take up the issue of self-determination and the commitment to human rights, democracy and self-determination in Kashmir. He was of the view that the prospects of any sort of trade deal with the Indian government should be done keeping in mind their appalling human rights record.

Sarah Owen, Member of Parliament from Lupton north argued that if you care about human rights you care about Kashmir and this sentiment is shared across the parliament and across the House. She stated that the lockdowns in Indian occupied Kashmir, shutting off connections, the terror and the fear that women and girls feel in particular should not continue. State sanctioned atrocities, rapes and the abuse, and Islamophobia should be condemned by all in the international community. She was of the view that Kashmiris have an absolute right to self-determination and the international community has a duty to support the delivery of this right through UN resolutions and the Kashmiris should determine their own future. She expressed solidarity from the people of Lupton north with the people of Kashmir. Ms. Owen further stated that after Brexit

the UK government will have an opportunity to put its money where its mouth is on human rights issues. Concluding her remarks, she expressed the hope to see a moral and ethical case in terms of future trade deals with India.

Richard Bergen, Member of Parliament from Leeds echoed the sentiments and said that it is not simply a bilateral matter and UK owes a special duty to the people of Kashmir. Moreover, waiting for decades and decades for justice and self-determination is completely unacceptable and people in Leeds east, especially the Kashmiri Diaspora have felt the burning injustice in Indian occupied Kashmir. He further stated that this cannot be allowed to disappear from discussions about human rights and self-determination for the Kashmiri people. The UN has treated the issue as if the people of Kashmir don't matter regardless of the human rights abuses they face every day. The UK parliamentarians are calling out and denouncing the human rights abuses of the Modi government. He further stated that even before the Covid-19 health crisis the people in Kashmir were forced into a lockdown of another type by the government of India. It's more than overdue that the United Nations fulfils its promise to the Kashmiri people and as part of that, UK must recognize its special duty to the people of Kashmir. He also raised concerns regarding the preparations by Modi government to try and skew the outcome of any plebiscite and acknowledged that a plebiscite has to be free and fair because the Kashmiri people need to be able to determine their own future and the Kashmiri people need to be able to put decades of gross violations of human rights behind them and look forward to a better future together.

Anthia McIntyre, former MP from the Conservative Party from West Midlands in her remarks also expressed her solidarity with the people of Kashmir. She mentioned that you could visit the Pakistan side of Azad Kashmir but not the India occupied Kashmir says a lot. It's very important to keep up the pressure to allow people from outside the region to see what's going on and to be able to report on the atrocities and the abuse of human rights that we continually see in IOK. She reiterated that this is an international issue and not an internal dispute between Pakistan and India; it is an issue that affects the whole world. Furthermore, trade with India should not come at any price, trade is not possible until India complies with human rights in Kashmir.

Ms. Julie Watt expressed her solidarity with the Kashmiris and stated that solidarity is a core value of the European Union along with human rights, peace and democracy. She further stated

that the quarrel is not with the people of India but with its government. Many minorities in India are also suffering, we see farmers on the streets whose livelihoods are under threat and we have to stand in solidarity. Moreover, India has one of the worst records for gender-based violence in the world; there are lots and lots of situations with people in India where there is a need to show solidarity.

Yasmin Qureshi, Chairperson, All Party's Pakistan Parliamentary Group and Member of Parliament from Bolton said that 800,000 odd soldiers now roam the streets in Indian occupied Kashmir and things have gotten worse under Modi government. It is worrisome that the last election Modi won on the basis of getting really tough in Kashmir was one of the reasons a number of people voted for him. Hence, the challenge that we are facing now in relation to Kashmir is even greater than it was under the previous governments. She further said that it's not just the human rights abuses but the fact that all the laws have been changed. For the first time, people who don't live in Kashmir can buy land and live there in order to bring a demographic change in the Valley. The demographic change is also affecting the living standards as there was some sense of job security, but now with the change in law people from outside can take up jobs, thus depriving the people of Kashmir. She stressed that the demographic change will eventually make the issue of Kashmir similar to the issue of Palestine.

Lord Hussain Secretary General APPG in his remarks reiterated that Kashmir is an international dispute and it is not a bilateral issue by any means. The presence of UN observers on both sides of the Line of Control (LoC) is evidence that it is an internationally recognized dispute which has to be resolved according to UN resolutions with the help of a plebiscite so that the final say rests by the people of Kashmir. He stressed on the illegal detentions in the Valley, torture, rape, and killings with impunity under the Armed Forces Special Power Act. The law empowers the Indian Army to carry out actions in the Valley and not being questioned in any court of law. Since 1990, the army has had a free hand, a license to kill in Kashmir and the extent of the atrocities and the abuses can be verified by various international organizations including International Human Rights Watch and the United Nations Commission on Human Rights. The United Nations Commission on Human Rights reports 2018 and 2019 have discussed these issues in detail and has asked for a free access to go and investigate human rights abuses by India. But India has refused to cooperate. In addition, the UN report in 2020 has again

clearly said that the situation in Kashmir demands quick action and has asked the international community to intervene. The United Nations Security Council has met three times between 2019 and 2020 to discuss this particular issue, but sadly no decision has been taken.

Amjad Bashir, former Member of European Parliament highlighted torture and murder cases that take place in the Valley by the Indian forces. Nearly a hundred thousand deaths have taken place in Indian occupied Kashmir since the early 1980s, and over ten thousand rapes of women and young girls. He stressed on these human rights abuses to stop in IOK and for the world to wake up and realize the severity of the situation and that a peaceful resolution is the best way forward.

Mr. Bill, European Parliament Albanian Member of the Liberal Democrats from the European Union shed light on the possible leverage US and the European Union can have on India, keeping in mind India's desire to be a strategic partner to address its democratic problems particularly regarding Kashmir. The western powers can put pressure on India in terms of joining this alliance to actually come to the table over Kashmir.

Mr. Pervaiz, representative of All Parties Conference said that the people of Jammu and Kashmir have been struggling for the last 73 years. Kashmiris across IOK share their love for Pakistan. When someone is martyred in IOK they are wrapped and buried in the flag of Pakistan, this shows the kind of solidarity that exists in IOK for Pakistan. Looking back at history, Mr. Pervaiz stated that when the subcontinent was partitioned, Kashmir was a sovereign state, it had its own flag, its own constitution and its own set of laws. India itself incorporated Article 370 in its constitution. Later article 35A was incorporated to maintain the sovereign character of the state of Jammu and Kashmir, and until 1955 there was a visa requirement for Indians to visit IOK. Moreover, he said that India has adopted ethnic cleansing as a strategy in Kashmir and is rapidly changing the demography of the Valley. Non-resident Kashmiris are being allowed to purchase the land in Indian occupied Jammu and Kashmir to change the demographic composition which will be effective if in future plebiscite happens. There is a restriction on freedom of speech and expression and Kashmiri leadership is behind the bars and fake cases have been registered against them.

Mr. Abrar ul Haq, Chairman ,Youth Parliament of Pakistan & Pakistan Red Crescent, also spoke at the occasion and said that with the resilience shown by the youth on both sides of Kashmir,

freedom is not far. The growing distress, anxiety and depression among the youth of Indian occupied Kashmir is a matter of great concern which can lead to an alarming threat to the world's peace. He stressed on the need for a platform for the youth of Indian occupied Kashmir so that they are able to speak their heart out.

Mr. Sam Terry, Member of Parliament from London stated that Kashmir itself has been in a lockdown since August 2019 which has severely impacted its day to day life. There is media and communications blackout, and people are fearful of what's happening. Indian government has implemented tough measures and substantially increased its presence in terms of security forces and this has happened in the midst of a global pandemic. He further stated that it's imperative to continue to apply pressure to bring about a just settlement for the Kashmiri people and that means that the British government must acknowledge its historic role in Kashmir and take responsibility for the current situation. The British government cannot keep washing its hands and say it's a matter for Indian and the Pakistani governments to decide. The colonial history of Britain means that it has a responsibility to ensure that problems that have been caused because of that history are rectified for future generations to come.

Mr. Tony Lloyd, Member of Parliament from Rockdale in his remarks called upon New Delhi to respect those basic human rights in IOK and the United Nations resolutions that called for the right of self-determination for the Kashmiri people. These, he said, must be honored.

Mr. Shaffaq Mohammed, former Member of the European Parliament from Yorkshire and the Humber in his remarks stated that India has unilaterally abrogated Article 370. Human rights are universal rights and it is important to shine a spotlight on whatever human rights abuses take place by the Modi government because the more spotlights we put on Kashmir the better case will be made for Kashmir. Moreover, he showed disappointment with the United Nations and stated that the UN have a legal obligation and if India wants to play a bigger role internationally whether it's part of this coalition against China or wants to be part of the UNSC, it has to abide by international law. He stressed that India does not have clean hands when it comes to human rights issues whether that's in Kashmir, or the Citizen Amendment Act (CAA), or what's happening with the farmers in Indian Punjab.

Member of Pakistan National Assembly and Parliamentary Secretary for Finance, Mr. Zain Qureshi in his remarks shed light on the situation of the people of Illegally Indian occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJK). He said that the issue of IIOJK remains a story of unspeakable atrocities and grave human rights tragedies. Generations of Kashmiris have suffered tremendously as Kashmir dispute still awaits final disposition the resolution of which must be done in accordance with the UN Security Council resolutions and the aspirations of the Kashmiri people. The utter disregard for international law, humanitarian law and international resolutions by the Indian occupation forces in Kashmir continues to pose a question mark on the collective conscience of the international community. Indian unilateral and illegal actions of August 5, 2019, followed by an unprecedented military siege and a communications blockade stripped the Kashmiris of their fundamental freedoms. He further said that amidst rampant human rights abuse, there exists a culture of impunity which is reinforced by the draconian laws which promote complete lack of accountability by the perpetrators. The world needs to be aware of the numerous disturbing tales of innocent people of IIOJK as they bear the brunt of a systemic state violence. The Indian government wholeheartedly exploited the Covid-19 crisis to intensify the military crackdown, rendering the Kashmiris even more vulnerable than before. He shed light on the issue of the demographic change of the Valley which is being carried out by the Indian government through implementation of illegal draconian laws; incentives are being given to Hindus from outside Kashmir who are being offered to settle on the lands of the Kashmiris under the garb of development and national security. He urged on the need for a global spotlight on the pride of Kashmiris to halt the ongoing wave of human rights abuses by Indian security forces in Indian occupied Jammu and Kashmir.

Ms. Yasmin Dar, Member, National Executive Committee of the Labor Party in her concluding remarks echoed the sentiments of solidarity with the people of Kashmir and stated that the issue of Kashmir is not an issue between Pakistan and India, it is an international issue. She thanked the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad, Mr. Raja Najabat Hussain, Chairman JKSDMI, fellow Parliamentarians and the conveners of the conference.

PICTURES OF THE EVENT





