

PALLONE HOSTS HEARING ON PLIGHT OF KASHMIRI PANDITS

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Congressman Frank Pallone recently hosted a hearing on Capitol Hill to apprise Congressional aides about the lot of Kashmiri Pandits. Despite his unstinting support for India on Capitol Hill, the New Jersey Democrat and founder and former co-chair of the Congressional Caucus on India and Indian-Americans has never shied away from faulting New Delhi for its apathy towards Pandits who fled the Kashmir valley following terrorist violence in Jammu and Kashmir.

Pallone along with Congressman Sherrod Brown, Ohio Democrat pushed the State Department to include the plight of Pandits in its annual human rights report. During the Capitol briefing, Pallone questioned the state government and New Delhi's claims that the Pandits would be protected and resources allocated for their resettlement and rehabilitation. 'Certainly this has not been the case and the authorities have failed to protect the Pandits,' he said. He urged Congress to 'continue to urge President George W Bush to put more pressure on President Pervez Musharraf to stop militant infiltration into Kashmir and to end Pakistan's moral and military support of the fundamentalists responsible for the mass murder of the Pandits.'

The leading Pandit lobbyists in the US Dr Vijay Sazawal, National President, Indo-American Kashmir Forum, and Jeevan Zutshi, one of its founding members, apprised Congressional aides with their perspectives of the political and economic climate in the valley. They slammed the Mufti Mohammad Sayyed government, saying it had ignored the Pandits. Sazawal, while acknowledging a relatively improved security situation had led to increased tourism and an opportunity for Pandits to make short visits to the valley, argued, 'What has not changed is the hegemonic attitude of valley-based Muslims toward other constituents of the state, nepotism and corruption, over-reliance on federal subsidies and mismanagement of state-owned corporations.' 'What has not changed in the status of exiled Kashmiri Pandits, who now number over 300,000 refugees and the continuing lack of initiative to provide political and economic space for their aspiration.' Zutshi said as someone born in Kashmir, he understood 'the current form of terrorism better than someone in the US. We have lived with both moderate Islam and radical Islam in Kashmir and unless we recognize that the great fight of our time is between moderate Islam and radical Islam, we will not be addressing the basic roots of terrorism.'

B Raman, India Abroad columnist and former head of India's counter-terrorism at the Research and Intelligence Wing, India's external intelligence agency, who had testified before the House International Relations Comm-ittee, provided a lengthy analysis about Pakistan's complicity in fomenting terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir and Islamabad's alleged links to global terrorism. He said despite Musharraf's pledge to completely dismantle the Taliban, which the ISI trained and sponsored, 'thousands of Taliban fighters reside in mosques and madrasas with the full support of the provincial ruling party and militant Pakistani groups.' 'Taliban leaders wanted by the US and Kabul governments are living in nearby villages. All this is happening in a country whose government claims to be an ally of the United States in the war on terrorism and to which the Bush administration has pledged more than \$3 billion in aid.'

Sazawal vented his anger over the absence of Indian embassy officials at the briefing despite it having the imprimatur of the India Caucus and supported by the Democratic and Republican co-chairs Joe Crowley of New York and Joe Wilson of South Carolina. 'Their absence at this important meeting, in a sense, is reflective of the government's priorities in New Delhi where Kashmiri Pandits are fed empty rhetoric, while large sums of money and considerable political attention is given to Kashmiri terrorists and insurgents,' he said.