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Kashmiri Pandits brief members of U.S. Congress on way forward in troubled state

By Aziz Haniffa

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From left, Dr. Shakun Malik, Jeevan Zutshi, founder of Indo-American Community Federation (IACF), and Sanjay Puri chairman of U.S.-India Political Action Committee (USINPAC), at the podium, during a Congressional briefing titled, ‘Kashmir, the Way Forward,’ on Capitol Hill on Oct. 16.

WASHINGTON, D.C.— Over 200 Kashmiri Pandits from across the U.S., descended on Capitol Hill on Oct. 16 to interact with U.S. lawmakers and their aides at a Congressional briefing titled, ‘Kashmir, the Way Forward,’ in the aftermath of the government of India’s revoking Article 370 of the Indian Constitution that provides for special status for the Muslim-majority state of Kashmir.

“The objective of the briefing was to promote pluralism, reconnect and to reintegrate the hearts and minds of the people of Kashmir following the removal of Articles 370 and 35A on August 5, 2019.”

Taking the lead in organizing the briefing was the Indo-American Community Federation (IACF), founded by longtime Kashmiri Pandit activist Jeevan Zutshi, who got Congresswoman Anna Eshoo (D.-Calif.) to co-host the event. Partnering with the IACF, were the Kashmiri Overseas Association (KOA) and U.S.-India Political Action Committee (USINPAC), led by their chairpersons, Dr. Shakun Malik and Sanjay Puri.

Besides Eshoo, among the lawmakers who marked their presence included Reps. Ro Khanna, Mike Thompson, Zoe Lofgren, Mark Desaulneir and Dorthy Matsui, all Democrats from California.

The chairman of House Foreign Affairs Committee, Elliot Engel (D.-N.Y.) also attended the event, and in his brief remarks, said, “Democratic and pluralistic communities are very much needed to live harmoniously, and I commend all of you for promoting harmony across the globe.”

Earlier, Eshoo said, “It is a testament to this worthy cause (of the Indian American community) that we have so many members of Congress here to support you, including chairman Eliot Engel.”

“I am very touched and can’t believe so much torture is being inflicted in Kashmir,” she said, apparently referring to the ethnic cleansing alleged by the Pandits, who were driven from their homes in Jammu and Kashmir more than two decades ago due to the terrorism by alleged Pakistan-backed militants, and have been living as refugees in various parts of India, and now after the repeal of Article 370, have been left wondering if they could return to their ancestral homes.



Rep. Ro Khanna, seated extreme foreground with other members of the audience, listens to Rep. Zoe Lofgren speaking, while seated left to right are Rep. Anna Eshoo, co-host of the briefing, Dr. Shakun Malik, chair of Kashmiri Overseas Association (KOA), and Jeevan Zutshi, founder of Indo-American Community Federation (IACF).

Khanna, in his remarks, said, “I was born in the USA in 1976, and I am proud of my South Asian roots, and I came to this briefing to grasp the many issues related to the Kashmiri community, and I am glad that I am here tonight to learn more.”

11 SEP Malik, spoke of the sorry plight of the “ethnically cleansed Kashmiri Pandits and the discrimination faced by Kashmiri women, minorities and weaker sections of society due to Articles 370 and 35A,” while Puri informed the lawmakers and aides present that “Kashmir is a very serious issues for Indian Americans.”

He said, “It should also be an important issue to the U.S. as India is a vital partner,” and exhorted that “we must continue to work together so that the future generations of Kashmir, regardless of their background or religion, have an opportunity for good education, jobs and security.”

Jeff M. Smith, Research Fellow and the head of the South Asia Program at the conservative Heritage Foundation, recounted his previous visits to Kashmir and said, he was touched by the heart-wrenching stories of Kashmiri Pandit victims and wondered why “these stories of genocide and ethnic cleansing have not been covered by the western press while Pakistan’s narrative about Kashmir has been getting wide press coverage.”

He also explained to the audience that U.S. policy on Kashmir continues to be that any resolution of the problem has to be sorted out bilaterally between India and Pakistan without any third party intervention, and that the recent revocations of Articles 370 and 35A are clearly ^[1]_[SEP]“the internal matters of India.”

Earlier, gripping personal stories by victims of Kashmiri terrorism, particularly in 1990-1991 were shared by Swapna Raina, Dr. Archana Kokroo, and Sachin Koul, while Dr. C Shaykher, a cardiologist from Florida spoke about what he argued “are misconceptions about Hindutva” and provided a historic perspective of Kashmir, emphasizing “that Kashmiri Hindus have a 5,000-year documented civilizational legacy.”

Dr. Surinder Kaul, International Coordinator of Global Kashmiri Pandit Diaspora, stated that “the most dangerous framing of the issue in the U.S. media reporting is fanning religious polarization with the use of the Hindu Muslim binary,” and asserted, “The only binary that exists in Kashmir is that between peace and violence, and the latter was introduced by the gun culture of the terrorists.”

He said that just in the past few weeks, “terrorists aided and abetted by Pakistan have killed four innocent people in cold blood and are making attempts to disrupt public harmony.”

Kaul also referred to the bellicose saber rattling by Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan and his declarations of Jihad against India for the repeal of Article 370 and the alleged subjugation of the Kashmiri people in his eyes.

Zutshi who earlier had joined Eshoo in welcoming the U.S. lawmakers, their aides and the hundreds of guests and other participants, returned to the podium to address the question of ‘The Way Forward for India,’ and emphasized that the “only way forward for Kashmir is to ensure that people of all religions, including minorities live peacefully in Kashmir with justice, security and economic opportunities for all.”

He expressed the hope that with the abrogation of Articles 370 and 35 A “will result in expanded and equal opportunities to all and a chance for the development of regions like Ladakh, which have been neglected for far too long.”

Zutshi also made a fervent appeal “to my fellow Kashmiris, that we must promote pluralism in the state so that all communities can live together as they did before Pakistani trained militants created mayhem and forced Kashmiri Pandits to leave Kashmir valley. Intra-Kashmiri dialogue, exchange programs of students, writers, artists to offer their strengths in all the regions will definitely help in reconnecting and reintegrating hearts and minds of the people.”

He also said that “we must educate community members to use discretion when making hurtful intolerant or bigoted comments on social media and elsewhere. I urge you to remember -- secularism was not promoted by a law or by a constitutional belief – it was promoted by the ethos of the society. The ethos of our society in India has not changed, and the ethos of India, the Hindu ethos, is very secular.”
