

Major Kashmir symposium to be held in California
Aziz Haniffa, Washington May 10, 2001 13:45 Hrs (IST)

THE Indo-American Kashmir Forum (IAKF), a leading organization representing Kashmiri Pandits in the US, has organized a major symposium on what it called the proxy war being waged by Pakistan against India by sponsoring militant groups. "From Paradise to Ideological Battleground: A Symposium on the Kashmir Conflict," will be held in the Northern California Bay Area on June 9 and will feature Congressional leaders, noted academics and policy wonks. Among those billed to attend are Jim McDermott, Washington Democrat and co-chair of the Congressional Caucus on India, former US ambassador Teresita Schaffer, of the Center for Strategic and International Studies(CSIS), Yossef Bodansky, director of the Republican Task Force on Terrorism in Congress, D.R. Sardesai, historian at the University of California and Raju Thomas of the department of political science, Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Also billed to appear at the event, which is being co-sponsored by several local and national Indian American organizations, are the mayor of Fremont, Gus Morrison, and India's Consul General in San Francisco R.M. Abhyankar.

The full-day symposium will be followed by a cultural evening that will feature a preview of the documentary *Sharmartha Apne Desh Mein* (Refugees in Their Own Land) produced by Bombay-based film producer Ashok Pandit, the first filmmaker to highlight the plight of the Kashmiri Pandits. According to IAKF, "Overt and covert threats of nuclear action by Pakistan since 1991 to back its sponsorship of the violence have led many international observers to consider Kashmir a nuclear flashpoint." It said during the past 12 years, the introduction of Islamic fundamentalism and Talibanism had further complicated the situation, with insurgents justifying their violent acts on the grounds of "jihad" and bringing extreme and widespread misery to the civilian population of the state." The IAKF said the symposium was aimed at informing the participants of the "endless stream of Pakistan-trained mercenaries and terrorists who flood the state every year, with thousands of "madrasahs" (Islamic religious schools) and terrorist training camps in Pakistan and Afghanistan acting as jihad factories for young Muslims around the world". It said it was important to get out the message that "the ultimate target of this jihad enterprise is not just Kashmir, but the rest of India, and ultimately the entire world.

The IAKF, which has successfully lobbied the US Congress, which, in turn, has convinced the State Department to include the plight of the Pandits in its annual human rights report, said ever since the Kashmir insurgency began in 1989, there had been an "ethnic cleansing of over 300,000 Kashmiri Pandits, the original inhabitants of the state", who have been still "unable to return to their homeland due to continued threats from Pakistan-sponsored terrorists". The IAKF, said the Kashmiri Pandit, now dispersed throughout India and the world is hard press to "keep its culture and identity alive while in India".

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