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Kashmiri Pandits brief US lawmakers on situation in Kashmir

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WASHINGTON: Ahead of the next week's Congressional hearing on human rights situation in South Asia, Kashmiri Pandits residing in various parts of the US held a briefing for US lawmakers and their aides on ground realities in the Valley and violations of their rights for the past several decades.

Indian American Congressman Ro Khanna, Congressmen Mike Thompson, Zoe Lofgren, Mark Desaulneir and Doris Matsui along with Chairman of House of Foreign Relation Committee, Elliot Engel, attended the congressional briefing at Capitol Hill on Wednesday.

Congresswoman Anna Eshoo in her opening statement emphasised that India and the US, the two largest democracies in the world, need to work to strength democracies.

The event 'Kashmir the Way Forward,' was organised by Indo-American Community Federation in collaboration with Kashmiri Overseas Association (KOA) and the US-India Political Action Committee (USINPAC).

The Asia-Pacific and Non-Proliferation Subcommittee of the House Foreign Affairs Committee has scheduled a hearing on human rights in Kashmir and other parts of South Asia on October 22.

KOA president Shakun Malik talked about the plight of Kashmiri Pandits and the discrimination faced by Kashmiri women, minorities and weaker sections of the society due to Articles 370 and 35A.

The government ended Jammu and Kashmir's special status on August 5 and split it into two union territories, saying the move

would help ensure that people of the state get the same constitutional benefits as the rest of the country and spur development.

During the briefing, a group of Kashmiri Pandits shared the stories of victims of terrorism in 1990-1991.

“The most dangerous framing of the issue in the US media reporting is fanning religious polarisation with the use of the Hindu-Muslim binary,” said Surinder Kaul, international coordinator of Global Kashmiri Pandit Diaspora.

Jeevan Zutshi from California, who hosted the briefing event, emphasised that the 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 and hoped that US congress passes a resolution endorsing Kashmiri Pandit "ethnic cleansing".

Dr C Shaykher, a cardiologist from Florida, spoke about misconceptions about Hindutva and touched upon the historic perspective of Kashmir with emphasis that Kashmiri Hindus have a five thousand years of documented civilisational legacy.

Jeff M Smith, research fellow from Heritage Foundation think-tank, who has previously visited Kashmir, was touched by the 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.

Bharath Gopaldaswamy talked about the geopolitics of Kashmir and sympathised with the Kashmiri Hindus for their massive displacement from their roots.

A brief video presentation about current life in Kashmir depicting the gradual return to normalcy in Kashmir, including business in hospitals and schools were part of the event.