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Plight of Kashmiri Pandits Focus of Poignant Discussion

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WASHINGTON—The poignant tale of the Kashmiri Pandits who were driven out of the Kashmir valley by a subtle practice of “ethnic cleansing” and the apathy of the Government of India were the focus of a discussion on “Kashmir and Terrorism” at the Indian American Friendship Council conference here.

The systematic destruction of their temples and the distinct cultural identity of the Kashmiri Hindus by Islamic fundamentalists and the appalling attitude of the Farooq Abdullah government were also highlighted by the participants who represented the various Kashmiri organizations in the U.S.

All of them referred to the recent killings of Pandits in Sangrampore to emphasize the need for the Government to act quickly to create ‘safe zones’ for the minorities living in the valley.

Jagan Kaul bitterly criticized the Indian government for its lack of support, even in the face of belligerent and brazenly attacks on the Pandits by the militants, and its failure to create safe zones for them to return to their homes.

Dr. Avtar Mattoo blamed Pakistan, the ISI and the rise of Islamic fundamentalism throughout the world for the present situation in the valley.

Although each one of them presented a different viewpoint, there was consensus on one thing -- that “Kashmiri Pandits should return after the Government provides security by creating safe zones” for the uprooted community.

Jeevan Zutshi, a founding director of the Indian American Kashmiri Forum, set the tone for the deliberations of the two-hour session when he spoke of the “utter callousness” of the Indian government to the plight of the Pandits, and its patent effort to sideline the

real issue involved in the migration of the Hindus and the systematic torching of their localities in Srinagar.

He quoted a leading Jammu daily newspaper to say that as recent as last month over 5,000 Pandit homes were burnt and even the debris removed, even though as many as 2,500 houses belonging to the Pandits were sold or continue to be under illegal occupation of some people. The Government is now faced with many legal difficulties in clearing these encroachments.

Referring to the appeal of Chief Minister Farooq Abdullah to Kashmiri Pandits to return to the valley, Zutshi said: “Where will the returning Pandits live even if they decide to respond positively to Abdullah’s appeal in utter disregard of the mercenary threat? Where are the ‘safe zones’ which the Kashmiri administration has spoken of? The creation of such zones, even with the best of will and effort, would be possible only over a period of time with careful planning and considerable outlays. Even the groundwork in this regard has not been undertaken, and how does the question of 300,000 Pandits returning to the valley arise?”

He expressed satisfaction that Prime Minister I.K. Gujral had shown some sensitivity to the problem when he visited the camps set up for refugee Pandits in Delhi and surrounding areas.

He hoped that the Gujral government would take the initiative to improve matters and ensure that adequate security and means of livelihood are created for the Pandits.

Hira Fotedar of the IAFK, J.B. Kaul of the Kashmiri Overseas Association, Maharaj Kaul of Kongpost Cultural Association, Wajahat Habibullah, minister for community affairs in the Indian Embassy, and Lalita Kaul also participated in the seminar.