**Kashmir: gaining global sympathy**

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December 22, 2018 the new

This past Saturday (Dec 15) was one of the bloodiest days in the history of Kashmir. Seven civilians were killed in a single incident, marking the highest toll in recent years, while dozens of others were injured when a trigger-happy force fired at protesters in the Pulwama district of South Kashmir.

This is not an isolated incident. In fact, not a day has gone by, since the current BJP government assumed power in New Delhi, without Kashmiris being killed. According to Al Jazeera, at least 400 people got killed in Kashmir this year – indicating the highest death toll in a year since 2008. Indian forces are conducting these repressive operations with full legal cover and without fearing of accountability.

The renewed wave of violence has brought the Kashmir issue back towards the international radar; the issue had largely been eclipsed since the 9/11 attacks. The world had largely turned its back on Kashmir and preferred to watch widespread human rights violations in the region from a safe distance. The international silence over Kashmir has also encouraged a culture of impunity that fashioned many bloody Saturdays over the years.

However, in recent years, Kashmir has become a global hotspot for major human rights violations; this has gradually shattered the international silence. Several international bodies are now calling for close scrutiny of human rights abuses, sustained repression and disproportionate use of force in the Kashmir valley.

In this background, the human rights committee of the European Parliament is all set to host a hearing on Kashmir in February next year, after nearly 11-years. A few weeks ago, Cédric Gerbehaye, a Belgian photographer, held an exhibition portraying the pellet-gun victims of Kashmir at the European Parliament. The exhibition got immense attention from EU members and civil society across Europe.

Subsequently, Rania Abouzeid, an award-winning print journalist contributed a long piece on Kashmir along with pictures of Gerbehaye; this appeared in the issue of ‘National Geographic’. This story captures the real pain and suffering of the Kashmiri people who have been caught in an unending conflict since last three decades. This article went viral and became one of the most referred-to pieces over the Kashmir conflict.

Recently, an All-Party Parliamentary Kashmir Group of the British parliament issued an 18-page-long report on Kashmir, largely endorsing the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights’ 49-page report which is considered a path-breaking document issued in June this year.

Besides featuring the gross human rights violations in Kashmir and calling for international investigation, these reports reiterate the peoples’ right to choose their destiny. The United Nations High Commissioner’s report urges both India and Pakistan to ‘Respect the right to self-determination of the Kashmiri people’. Remarkably, the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has not only backed Human Rights High Commissioner’s call for an international investigation into human rights situation in Kashmir but also stated that it (report) represents the “voice of the UN”.

The Independent Permanent Human Rights Commission (IPHRC) of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation also published a 16-page long report wherein it has been stated that “the Kashmir dispute is not merely a question over territorial jurisdiction between India and Pakistan, but it concerns the future of millions of people who wish to exercise their inherent and inalienable right to self-determination.”

The publication of the above mentioned reports broke three long-held myths: First, that Kashmir has lost international empathy, particularly that the United Nations’ mechanism is no longer relevant to Kashmir.

Second, that the right of self-determination is an obsolescent part of the international discourse. And, finally, these reports underlined the need to establish an independent investigation to make culprits accountable before a court of law. Those who are involved in the violation of human rights cannot get away scot-free.

Meanwhile, once again the United Nations’ Third Committee unanimously adopted a resolution on self-determination last month. The resolution reaffirms international support for the people’s right to self-determination as a fundamental human right. It brought back international attention to the long-pending issues on the UNSC agenda i.e. Kashmir and Palestine.

An Italian photographer, Camillo Pasquarelli came up with an innovative project. He spent the whole winter in Kashmir last year to experience the conflict, its memory and peoples’ political aspirations. ‘Time Magazine’ featured a comprehensive story about the plight of Kashmiri pellet-guns’ victims based on his photographs and experiences in September 2018. He told ‘Time’ that “pain and suffering surrounds you in Kashmir all the time. Somehow, everyone you speak to is related to the conflict. Maybe his neighbor has been injured, maybe his daughter has been killed.”

Unprecedentedly, the ‘New York Times’ published a front-page story titled ‘In Kashmir, Blood and Grief in an Intimate War: ‘These Bodies Are Our Assets’ a few month ago. It says that: “Years ago, Pakistan pushed thousands of militants across the border... Now, the resistance inside the Indian areas is overwhelmingly homegrown”.

Almost all these articles and reports call for urgent reliable scrutiny and attention to de-escalate the present level of tension and rescind the diplomatic logjam in Kashmir. Revocation of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act 1990 and amendment to the Public Safety Act 1978 are persistently being recommended to enable prosecution of those security personnel in the civilian judicial system who are involved in human rights violations.

Some of the issues raised included unmarked graves and use of pellet firing shotguns were vigorously highlighted in all articles. A comprehensive public investigation into the identities of bodies in mass and unmarked graves, with an independent forensic verification process, and provision of full freedom to operate the information mechanism so as to benefit the families of suspected victims of enforced disappearances.

Last year, Amnesty International presented the cases of 88 people whose eyesight was damaged by metal pellets fired by Indian forces, in a report titled ‘Losing Sight in Kashmir: The Impact of Pellet-Firing Shotguns’.

Sustaining and expanding the currently existing international empathy for Kashmir is a serious challenge. Unfortunately, the current movement in Kashmir is feared to be turning towards radical ideas and to further their political goals. This is a perilous trend. All these options were exhausted long ago, and had turned out as self-inflicting tools. If this trend remains unchecked, the world might lose its interest again and begin viewing it as a part of the global wave of jihad. Kashmir deserves an international compassion which is missing due to the perception that radical groups are close to the resistance movement. This has led to immense global isolation.

A series of self-introspection and serious self-reflection exercises are required to develop a formidable strategy in order to get out of the present crisis and initiate a process of engagement with India, as Prime Minister Imran Khan publically pronounced recently.

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