

COMMENT 204 - Decades of Patience and An Invisible Change in Kashmir

By **Ambreen Yousuf**

24 February 2021– DOI: [10.48251/SADF.ISSN.2406-5617.C204](https://doi.org/10.48251/SADF.ISSN.2406-5617.C204)



Ambreen Yousuf is a research scholar at Jamia Millia Islamia University New Delhi.

On 17th February 2021, a group of 24 foreign diplomats arrived in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) for a two-day visit. The group was headed by European Union (EU) Ambassador Ugo Astuto and was comprised of envoys from various EU member states – including French envoy Emmanuel Lenain, Italian envoy Vincenzo de Luca, Swedish envoy Klas Molin, Irish envoy Brendan ward, Dutch envoy Maren van den Berg and Bangladeshi envoy Mohammad Imran. Envoys from countries such as Brazil, Cuba, Estonia, Finland, Tajikistan, Portugal, Malawi, Eritrea, Cote d’Ivoire, Ghana, Senegal, Malaysia, Bolivia, Belgium and Kyrgyzstan also accompanied the group. The tour’s primary purpose was to assess the ground situation and normalcy in J&K.

The delegation visited J&K for the first time since the outbreak of covid-19 pandemic. It was the third visitor delegation to the valley since the state’s bifurcation and the removal of special status within India’s constitution. Last year two groups visited J&K – in January and February. The present delegation meeting was endorsed by the government so as to access the ground situation after the District Development Council (DDC) elections (Haider, 2021). According to reports, the valley observed a complete shutdown - and tight security measures were taken to protect the visitors during their stay (Ashiq, 2021). After these arrived in the capital city, they visited various places and met with different key stakeholders. A meeting with both the DDC and Panchayat members was scheduled on the outskirts of the city, in the Budgam district. In Budgam, residents also met and interacted with envoys. Budgam’s DDC chairman, Nazir Ahmad Khan, told visitors that “J&K is witnessing the strengthening of democracy” (Mir & Lashkar,

2021). He also expressed appreciation regarding the civil and police administration for the peaceful conduct of the elections and the restoration of grassroots democracy (Mir & Lashkar, 2021). Envoys were also briefed regarding the process of both panchayat systems and DDC elections by several DDC and panchayat members.

During the two-days visit, envoys toured different locations, met people from different sections, and discussed several structural issues. The Sher-e-Kashmir International Conference Centre (SKICC) is located on the banks of famous Dal Lake in Srinagar; there envoys met various groups and members of the civil society (Mir & Lashkar, 2021). While exploring the Hazratbal Shrine, a group of local journalists interacted with envoys in the evening. Before departing to Jammu, said envoys also analysed the ground situation at the Line of Control by [visiting](#) the headquarters of the 15-Corps (Army) in the Badami Bagh area – where they were briefed on the perils of cross-border terrorism (Mir & Lashkar, 2021).

While interacting with foreign envoys, Lieutenant Governor (LG) Manoj Sinha also acknowledged the efforts by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, which were said to usher the Union Territory (UT) into a new era, bringing [socio-economic development](#) in the region and [empowering citizens](#). He added that “we have developed an [ecosystem of democratic values](#), [welfare principles](#) and [economic developments](#) in J&K, and the August 6 move has ended the [years of sufferings](#) of J&K people”.

The European Union’s delegation in Jammu and Kashmir

The People’s Alliance of Gupkar Declaration (PAGD) is a political alliance of mainstream leaders/regional political parties formed after the abrogation of Article 370. The formation of this alliance aims to work for the [restoration of the special status](#) of Jammu and Kashmir revoked on 5th August 2019. It comprises a group of senior leaders detained a day before Article 370 was removed. The release of detained leaders held at different locations began after [four months](#) and in a phased manner. The former Chief Minister Mehbooba Mufti (also first woman chief minister of J&K) was released after over 14 months of detention and ahead of the revocation of Article 370. Some members of the PAGD also contested the DDC elections held several months before.

A DDC vice chairperson and National Conference leader alleged that many were imprisoned for the last [three days](#) and not allowed to meet the EU delegation (Ashiq, 2021). Some PAGD members also elected through DDC elections have expressed deep concern for not being allowed to engage with the diplomats. A DDC member from Budgam district said that “we are also elected members but we were [not allowed](#) to move out from our rooms to convey our viewpoints to the envoys” (Mir & Lashkar, 2021). The former chief minister of J&K, Omar Abdullah, criticised the administration and stated that “we have seen these [guided tours](#) in the past, particularly in the immediate aftermath of August 5, 2019. They serve no useful purpose because the visiting delegation is allowed to meet only hand-picked individuals. If this proposed delegation is going to do the same thing, this visit will be as [pointless](#) as previous ones” (Ashiq, 2021).

Similarly, the Hurriyat Conference (a fraction of the separatist party) expressed disappointment and said that “a curated tour of foreign dignitaries to showcase normalcy in the valley is misleading”. The Hurriyat leader headed by Mirwaiz Umar Farooq has urged the visiting 24 foreign diplomats to “[push for a dialogue](#)” on the Kashmir issue. A Hurriyat spokesperson also stated that “the envoys should use their good offices and help in facilitating dialogue among India, Pakistan and people of J&K for the resolution and for the sake of peace in this highly volatile region” (Ashiq, 2021). According to the spokesperson, the people’s spontaneous strike, the only means of protest left, speaks volumes of what is felt and wanted. Hurriyat’s efforts towards “seeking a dialogue among India, Pakistan and people of J&K as a means of peaceful resolution of the issue have been snubbed” (Ashiq, 2021).

The European delegation has witnessed a [visible change](#) in J&K and they called their tour an [eye-opener](#) improving their understanding of important issues concerning J&K. Some envoys also questioned members of civil society regarding on which basis they were selected for an official meeting. Last year, ambassadors had expressed their desire to meet former Chief Ministers (Mehbooba Mufti, Farooq Abdullah and Omar Abdullah); however they were at the time detained. This year, before the delegation’s arrival, workers in Srinagar were spotted dismantling scores of security bunkers and barricades. In a significant remark, the [EU spokesman](#) has underlined that the “right of freedom of expression online and

offline is a key value for all democracies” (Ashiq, 2021). Furthermore, he stated that “we have taken note of recent steps such as the election of District Development Councils and the resumption of 4G internet services. ... We look forward to a number of other important steps to be taken in the [political and economic sphere](#), including the early organisation of the legislative assembly elections”. A view supporting a continued EU dialogue with India on the Kashmir issue was also voiced.

Conclusion

Jammu and Kashmir took centre stage in global attentions after the abrogation of Article 370. South Asian countries such as Bhutan, Sri-Lanka, Maldives, Nepal and Bangladesh have all supported Indian move. Countries from other regions such as Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, Israel, Russia and others have not only supported the position but further acknowledged it as an Indian internal matter. Malaysia and Turkey, as well as the European Union and some of its member states have found the situation worrying and expressed deep concerns regarding human rights, and freedom of expression. A support was voiced for long-term peace and normalcy in the region. According to a report, German Chancellor Angela Merkel during her visit to India has stated that the situation in Kashmir was not sustainable and must be improved, for a lockdown cannot be supported for long periods (Shah, 2019). Sweden’s Foreign Minister Ann Linde has urged the Indian government to “lift the remaining restrictions” and restore free movement and communication opportunities. The EU’s Ambassador to India also urged for the freedom of movement and restoration of normalcy. The current visits by diplomats will wield a positive outcome considering the EU’s commitment to democracy, rule of law and respect for human rights. The vicious circle of violence in Kashmir must end and long-term peace must be restored.

References

Ashiq, P. (2019, December 30). Five Kashmiri political leaders after four months of detention. The Hindu.

<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/five-kashmiri-political-leaders-released-after-four-months-of-detention/article30433629.ece>

Ashiq, P. (2021, February 18). Envoys visit J&K amid cheers, protests. The Hindu.

<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/european-union-envoys-arrive-in-srinagar-to-assess-jk-situation/article33857627.ece>

Ashiq, P. (2021, February 18). Push for dialogue, Mirwaiz's Hurriyat tells visiting envoys. The Hindu.

<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/push-for-dialogue-mirwaizs-hurriyat-tells-visiting-envoys/article33866142.ece>

Ashiq, P. (2021, February 19) EU calls for early polls in J&K. The Hindu.

<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/eu-calls-for-early-polls-in-jk/article33882806.ece>

Greater Kashmir. (2021, February 18). Government selling normalcy of compulsion go EU delegation as peace.

<https://www.greaterkashmir.com/news/kashmir/govt-selling-normalcy-of-compulsion-to-eu-delegation-as-peace/>

Haider, S., & Ashiq, P. (2021, February 16). E.U., Other envoys head to Jammu and Kashmir to study 'situation on ground'. The Hindu.

<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/foreign-envoys-on-two-day-jk-visit-from-feb-17-to-assess-situation-post-ddc-polls-officials/article33852051.ecev>

Mir, E., & Lashkar, R. A. (2021, February 18). 24 diplomats visit J&K in third delegation since Article 370 move. The Hindustan Times.

<https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/24-diplomats-visit-j-k-in-third-delegation-since-article-370-move-101613594403320.html>

Shah, K., & Shah, K. M. (2020, July). Kashmir After Article 370: India's Diplomatic Challenge. ORF Occasional Paper. <https://www.orfonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/ORF-OccasionalPaper-259-Kashmir-Diplomatic.pdf>

The Hindu. (2019, November 1). Current Situation in Kashmir not good and not sustainable, says Angela Merkel. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/german-chancellor-angela-merkel-on-jammu-and-kashmir/article29856547.ece>

The Hindu. (2021, February 18). J&K situation witnessing a visible change, envoys tell L.G Sinha. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/jk-situation-witnessing-a-visible-change-envoys-tell-l-g-sinha/article33874019.ece>

The Hindustan Times. (2021, February 17). 'Impressive': Foreign envoys after visiting Jammu and Kashmir. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/impressive-foreign-envoys-after-visiting-jammu-and-kashmir-101613568748986.html>

The Quint. (2020, October 15). Here's What the Gupkar declaration 2.0 Aims to achieve in J&K. <https://www.thequint.com/news/politics/gupkar-declaration-2-jammu-and-kashmir-meeting-explained>

19 Avenue des Arts 2nd floor, 1210 Brussels, Belgium
E 0833.606.320 RPM Bruxelles
Email: info@sadf.eu Web: www.sadf.eu