

Report of Visit to Pakistan and Azad Kashmir, Saturday 27 July - Saturday 3 August.

Richard Corbett MEP

Note: The visit took place in the days immediately before India's unilateral actions of 5 August sending more troops to Indian Occupied Kashmir and ending the special protections conceded to it under the Indian Constitution

Day 1 (27 July)

Arrive meet with Raja Najabat Hussein (Chair of JKSDMI) and other delegation members: Shaffaq Mohammed (LibDem), Irina Von Wiese MEP (Vice Chair EP Human Rights Committee, LibDem) and her assistant Hussain Khan, Cllr Nazia Rehman from Wigan, (Labour) and Sardar Siddique Khan from Brussels. (MPs Richard Burgon and Imran Hussein had dropped out at the last minute.)

Go to meet the President of Azad Kashmir Sardar Masood Khan in Kashmir House Islamabad with (well attended) press Conference, followed by lunch in the President's House. President is a knowledgeable former diplomat. Also met Ubaid Ur Rehman Qureshi, President of Youth Parliament of Pakistan and his team, JKSDMIPK Islamabad team members Ms Naseema Wani MLA, Ms Sehrish Qamar MLA.

Evening meeting followed by dinner with Kashmir media: Sheikh Tajammul Islam (Director Kashmir Media Services Islamabad) as well as Abdul Hameed Lone, Syed Aijaz Ahmad Rehmani and others.

Day 2

Drive to Mirpur, the district in Azad Kashmir from which most British Pakistanis originally came. The Mangla dam, built in the early 1960s, created a huge lake displacing several villages and small towns. Their inhabitants were (partly) compensated but not all of them built new houses in the area, many went to the big cities in Pakistan or emigrated to the UK, which at the time had labour shortages. More came later to join extended family members, some returned and some go back and forth a few times every year - all meaning there are extensive links to Britain. Sometimes particular villages have strong links to specific UK towns, so in some places we met people with Yorkshire accents, in another they had a Brummie accent, and so on! On the road were several British themed shops, and even a "British fish n chips" restaurant.

Altogether we had seven visits/meetings in the area:

- A mid morning meeting in Dadyal with local government figures, journalists, business and civil society reps, organised by the Civil Society of Dadyal
- Then to Chaksawari for a lunch reception hosted by local Businessman and Muslim League N leader Raja Shujahat Khan
- Shaffaq's mother's house, meeting his extended family and neighbours.

- The Mangla lake bridge: 7km long road and viaduct on stilts but with the key middle 400m missing, pending a lengthy legal dispute with the contractors: the middle part of the channel had turned out to be deeper than they thought! When completed it will connect the western side of the lake with Mirpur city avoiding a 45 min drive around
- An Emergency clinic (Bangrilla Community Hospital) built with help from Yorkshire Kashmiris through the UK-based Charity Umeed Welfare Trust
- The impressive Kashmir Orphan Relief Trust (KORT), an orphanage set up after the 2005 earthquake and financed in no small part by donations from British Kashmiris, organised by Mohammed Akhtar from Leicester. Each room has a plaque above the door giving the name of a donor: several from Bradford and Keighley.
- The Muslim Hands charity in New Mirpur town, set up in Nottingham in the 1990s, now worldwide with a focus on helping with natural disasters, conflict victims and, in between, focusing on street children (including, in Pakistan, using football - not cricket! - as a tool to reach out and organise).

Then the drive back to Islamabad for dinner with Tahoe Aziz of Conciliation Resources and Ershad Mahmud of the Centre for Peace, Development & Reform about prospects for compromise.

Day 3 (29th July)

To the Pakistan Parliament to meet the Chair of the Kashmir committee, Fakhar Imam. He was well informed on all kinds of issues, from UK politics to latest world trade statistics. Was open-minded on possibility of deal with India on Kashmir noticing a “silver lining” around current dark cloud.

Afternoon to a hotel to meet and have lunch with representatives from the cross-party Hurriyet Conference from Indian Occupied Kashmir, including Syed Faiz Naqashbandi Convenor of APHC Mirwahiz Group.

Evening “interaction” event at Islamabad Club with youth representatives organised by the Pakistani Youth Parliament President Mr Ubaid Ur Rehman Qureshi, with various speakers, including the former interior minister Sheryar Afridi. The latter gave an impassioned speech about how Europe was an example to the world which South Asia should follow. One of the young speakers was a student called Ahmed Qasmi, originally from Srinagar, whose parents were both in jail there. He said that when his father was jailed, he was still little and when he asked why, his mother said it was because his father hadn't done his homework. After a month, missing his father, he stopped doing his homework, hoping to be sent to jail too to see his Dad.

Dinner with PPP and journalists at same venue with Pakistan People's Party leaders, organised by Chaudhary Mohammed Matloob Inqlabi.

Day 4

Go to the newly created Ministry for Human Rights and meet the minister Dr. Shireen M Mazari and Secretary Kamran Agam Khan Rajar. The laws are mostly there - it's a matter of enforcement. They even have a law protecting trans-gender people - but not on protecting LGBT as "we are an Islamic republic and the Koran forbids it, but we equally don't have a law against it and we do have an LGBT community". New bills coming to Parliament on legal aid, rights of domestic workers, disability, women's inheritance rights, and juvenile protection, including child marriage ("I confronted the Minister for Religious Affairs on that one"). There is a non-Muslim marriage law for Hindus and, more recently (because it needed consultation of 17 denominations), Christians. They've set up help lines with pro bono lawyers to help abused women and child protection: the number is even written on every phone bill.

Enforcement is, however, largely a matter for the provinces but the federal ministry does do some monitoring and runs its own awareness programmes. Sometimes a province goes further: when the federal legislation raised marriage age to a minimum of 16, Sindh raised it to 18.

The EU is helping with awareness programmes "but their bureaucracy is almost as bad as ours". She raised Human Rights in Europe: treatment of refugees, islamaphobia, right to wear religious symbols, nationality rules. And Indian Occupied Kashmir and the likely changes to the Indian constitution.

She's written a paper on what aspects of the Good Friday Agreement could be applied to a solution for the Kashmir conflict.

Then off to the Strategic Studies Institute Islamabad (SSII). Meet its Chair Khalid Mahmood and various researchers. Apart from discussing Kashmir, we had a briefing on the situation in Afghanistan and the apparent willingness of the Taliban to negotiate and compromise. (They recommend their Website for up to date info).

Return to the Parliament again, this time to meet the Chair of the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee Sen Mushadid Hussein Sayed. Another eloquent and very informed interlocutor. He has 3 requests for us, that Europe must help on 1. Kashmir, with its oldest still running armistice line in the world (second oldest is Korea) which is holding back South Asia, 20% of the world's population. 2. Afghanistan 3. Fighting islamaphobia, not least in Europe itself (he referred not just to now, but to the Bosnia civil war where he had been to Sarajevo during the siege and had supplied weapons to the government despite a UN embargo).

Then a tour of the Senate museum and the Chamber. Then a drive around federal district as we're early for next appointment. Notice ads against plastic bags "if you can't use it, refuse it!". Islamabad is a planned capital city dating from the 1960s/ 70s with monumental style government buildings and wide boulevards with names like Constitution Avenue. All elegant, but with many ad hoc police checkpoints (some seemingly sponsored by Pepsi, judging by the ads on the signs saying "Check Point!").

Next to the Foreign Ministry to meet Shah Mehmood Qureshi, the Foreign Secretary, and departmental chiefs. He was most interested in Brexit - and how it was bad news for them. Also EU trade and GSP+. On Kashmir, usual discussion, but when he said

“if India takes one step, we’ll take two”, I asked him what those would be, but he did not want to give specific examples. Did mention the interdependence with India on the management of water supplies and the Indus River treaty.

Back to hotel to do TV interviews.

Day 5

We joined the President of Azad Kashmir Sardar Masood Khan to drive there with him in his convoy. We therefore went to his Islamabad residence to set off and were ready to go when the terrible news came through of a plane crash the previous day - a military plane had crashed after take off in a residential area where Kashmiri refugees live, with a death toll of 17, including a whole family. The President wants to go to the funeral tomorrow so would not be hosting us tonight in Muzaffarabad as originally planned: instead, we would return to Islamabad at the end of the day.

We set off in a convoy of 11 cars, including police vehicles (with anti-terrorist squad inside) at front and back with flashing lights, the President’s car with flags, and an ambulance. We leave in torrential rain on flooded roads, which abruptly stopped just as we left the city, only to reappear as we approach Kashmir, with torrents streaming down, often over the roads. We cross into Kashmir: roads distinctly better. Weather improves. Go right up into the hills to Rawalakot at just under 2000m altitude, to Poonch University where the Vice Chancellor, Prof Rasul Jan, and his staff were waiting outside to welcome us and take us into a hall to speak to an audience of some 350 people in a commemoration of the life of Sardar Ibrahim Khan, the “George Washington of Azad Kashmir”.

We visit a photo exhibition of the life of Sardar Ibrahim Khan, including some beautiful drawings from one of the students, a talented young woman artist, and chat to the students. Apparently, until a few years ago, the female students sat at the back of the hall on such occasions, but no longer.

After a quick opportunity to mingle with students and staff, the convoy resumed and went through a few more crowded villages (quite what the bemused inhabitants think of such convoys sweeping through, we can only speculate), before veering off near Horna Mera onto a small track to a nice house in the hills where we had lunch. The house belongs to the mother-in-law of the President.

Then back to the long and windy roads, up high hills and down deep valleys. We cross into Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa (KP), the new name of NorthWest Frontier Province, heading back to Islamabad. We pass within about 20km of where Osama Bin Ladin was found and killed.

On the way, we stop at a golf club that the President is Honorary President of (though he doesn’t play) at Bhurban (still in KP). It’s a 9 hole course in the mountains among the pine trees. We have tea on the terrace and have a short walk, including a stop at the putting green!

Day 6 (1 Aug)

Free morning after the previous day's long day and late return. Go to lunch at Monal restaurant in the hills above Islamabad with a view back down. Unfortunately the mist arrives 3 mins after we do! Restaurant is popular and has several layers of terraces.

Then visit the Kashmiri Institute for International Relations (motto: "Peace through dialogue"), set up in 1993 and part financed by the EU, part by membership subscriptions, meeting notably the Chair, Altaf Hussain Wani and the Exec Director Sardar Amjas Yousaf Khan. They have actually organised conferences here and in Dubai bringing both sides of the Kashmiri conflict together to find "common minimum ground to move forward". They have visited Northern Ireland to look at the peace process there and the GFA. They are trying to foster contacts between journalists on both sides of Line of Control. Want EU to back an inquiry as recommended by UNHCR report.

Stop for refreshments on a garden terrace of a start-up travel agency to discuss prospects for tourism here.

Evening to Saidpur village, an old village at the edge of Islamabad, recently restored. It was a garden resort during the Mughal period, with a spring providing water. It became a place of Hindu worship and still has a Hindu temple and Sikh Gudwara. It now also has several restaurants and shops. We were hosted by Ms Beenish Khan Lecturer in the Numal University Islamabad.

Day 7

A change to schedule: free day today and there will be no visit to Line of Control tomorrow (news is coming through about India sending even more troops to Kashmir and seemingly about to revoke the special protections offered in the Indian constitution to Kashmir), so we'll leave a day early - Raja sorts changes to ourflight bookings.

In evening go to the day-before-wedding-party (Mehndi) of a cousin of Sardar Sadique Khan in Rawalpindi. Spectacular!

Return to hotel just before midnight along still busy roads.

Day 8

Breakfast with some journalists.before setting off to the airport.

Summary of discussions

We were able to hear from a wide variety of perspectives from senior political figures in Islamabad to local residents in Azad Kashmir, from think tanks to refugees, from academics to charities.

We learned a lot about the detail of the situation as seen by the Pakistani side and by refugees from IOK. We saw how deeply felt this issue is across Pakistan, but also a willingness to explore potential compromise solutions, provided that the Kashmiri people themselves accept such solutions.

What we said to them (apart from explaining role of the cross party intergroup on Kashmir in the EP) was along the following lines:

The Kashmir issue has long been neglected by the international community but this is now changing because of:

- the recent report of the UN Human Rights Commission
- Trump's offer to mediate: he is unreliable but his offer does help put the issue on the world agenda.
- the reports of an extra 25,000 more Indian troops being sent to Kashmir at the beginning of August and tourists being asked to leave
- concerns that India is about to change its constitution to eliminate protections for Kashmir's autonomy and identity

We can:

- ask the EP human rights subcommittee to focus on cases in IOK
- press for the trade negotiations underway between the EU and India to be used as a vehicle for pressing India, at least on human rights (as is now common practice in EU trade deals)
- urge the EEAS and EU Member States to promote the implementation of Security Council resolutions on Jammu & Kashmir
- call upon the Council to adopt Travel Sanctions against Indian army officers involved in atrocities in Kashmir
- Ask to visit I.O.K.

We said that both sides should implement the recommendations of the UNHCR report (and Pakistan should take the moral high ground of unilaterally allowing access to the UNHCR and Amnesty International to its side of the LoC)

We think there are lessons that can be learned from Europe's experiences in reconciling former enemies and also from the Northern Ireland peace process as regards setting up cooperative structures, granting everyone there the right to choose either (or both) passports and as regards who has the right of self determination (eg if Jammu votes differently from Kashmir in a referendum, it should stay with India).

The key is to persuade India that it is in its own interests to settle the conflict for these reasons:

- the enormous cost of its military deployment in Kashmir

- **the blemish to its reputation created by the deteriorating human rights situation**
- **the enormous human, economic and political benefits of resolving this long standing conflict which has held up cooperation in South Asia**

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