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**'Kashmir movement shifting to a decisive new phase**'

In interview with Anadolu Agency, political thinker Khurshid Ahmad reminds Kashmir 'is an international issue' and on agenda of UN Security Council

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**Anadolu Agency:** You have mentioned in one of your

write-ups that the Kashmir movement has entered into its decisive phase. What do you mean by that?

**Khurshid Ahmad (KA):** For more than the past 70 years,

I have been observing aspects of Kashmir from every angle. I have been reflecting on its history and the crests and troughs of the movement of the right of self- determination. I have been writing on this topic for the past 60 years.

I have no reservations in professing that the phase of this movement that has begun after 2016 and especially the situation that developed after Aug. 5, 2019, the struggle has arrived in its final phase. Although, it is difficult to predict the duration of this phase, there are palpable signs to predict that this is the last stage of the movement.

**Q:** At this decisive phase stage, what would be your recommendations?

**KA:** Let us be clear: Kashmir is not a land dispute between India and Pakistan. The issue is the question of self-determination of the people of the state of Jammu and Kashmir a part of the agenda for the partition of India. The issue is not bilateral. It is an international issue and is there on the agenda of the UN Security Council.

It has become imperative for Pakistan to adopt an effective and consistent line of thinking and action at this juncture. We can delay some issues necessary in the life of our nation, out of diplomatic and other compulsions. But as a Pakistani and a Muslim, we cannot ignore Kashmir or render it to a secondary status.

It is the responsibility of the people, the government of Pakistan, the government of Azad Kashmir and the overseas Pakistanis and Kashmiri diaspora to raise the issue at the international level. This target cannot be achieved only by issuing statements and messages on Twitter. Basic and effective efforts are needed for this purpose. If we shall attend to these issues, positive results are not too far.

No doubt, Indian fascism, and discrimination against Muslims and other minorities need to be exposed through our diplomatic efforts. But it is prudent to make a separate strategy and an appropriate narrative for it. It should be a part of our strategy. We should present it as a separate issue because of its dynamics. While we should talk about the rights of Indian Muslims and the other minorities, but should not allow it to be mixed with the Kashmir issue.

**Q:** It is said that Azad Kashmir is a base camp for the Kashmir resistance movement. What is your observation about the role of government and political parties in Muzaffarabad as a base camp?

**KA:** The Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) government should be allowed to take initiative and design a strategy in its own right. The president and the prime minister of AJK are both leaders with standing and competence.

The political parties of AJK must set aside their affiliation with the political parties of Pakistan and form a national government. Despite having a separate identity and being in opposition in Pakistan, they should work collectively with discipline and focus on the freedom of Kashmir. They should ensure an ideal government and governance in AJK. They should not drag Pakistani politics inside Kashmir. It should be noted here that there was complete unanimity among political parties until 1972 that Pakistani political parties should avoid casting their shadow on AJK.

[Ex-Pakistan Prime Minister] Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto for the first time pushed Pakistani political parties into the politics of AJK. But the experience of 48 years shows that Pakistani politics in Azad Kashmir has damaged their cause and struggle. All Pakistani political parties should return to the pre-1972 position unanimously. There is an example from Jama'at-e-Islami Pakistan, which never tried to build its unit or to interfere in the affairs of Jama'at-e-Islami Azad Kashmir. Although, both have adopted the same name they are separate organizations in all respects.

**Q:** Kashmir Committee in Pakistan has always got mired in controversies. What is your evaluation of this institution?

**KA:** The performance of the Kashmir Committee during the last two decades has been disappointing. The present government has also not been able to make it effective so far. Nonetheless, the Committee can and must play an important role within the country and abroad.

A competent, knowledgeable, and active person should head this Committee. He should have an aura, persona and an understanding to present the case at the national and international levels with full devotion. It is also suggested to appoint a special advisor to the Kashmir Committee. He must be an expert and proficient in global diplomacy. The Kashmir Committee and its head should operate with passion and take lessons from history.

**Q:** What is your opinion of an effective Kashmir Committee?

**KA**: A committee should be set up in Pakistan in consultation with the AJK government for wider consultations which should include former foreign ministers and prominent ambassadors. The people who have served effectively in Europe, the Far East, America and the Arab world should be sought to play their role.

Launching a global campaign to enforce a political and social boycott of India should also be considered. This factor played a key role in the liberation and to end racial discrimination in South Africa.

The Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) campaign against Israel launched by the Palestine freedom movement has found considerable takers in the world. We should try to present the case of Kashmir legally in international institutions and international court based on UN resolutions, reports of human rights institutions and resolutions of the Security Council of the General Assembly.

International conferences have the importance on national and international levels. But it is most important that meetings should be held with parliamentarians of different countries. They should try to present the resolutions on Kashmir in their parliaments. Contacts should be made with human rights organizations and try to pass resolutions there.

**Q:** Returning to the question that the movement has entered into a decisive phase, how do you assess the present stage and is there any qualitative change?

**KA:** The qualitative change is that the force of resistance against the occupied forces in Kashmir and the rulers of Delhi has mounted to such a level that the fear of death has vanished. It is the most prominent and commendable situation of this freedom movement. In the meantime, the pro-Indian Muslim leadership has exposed itself, to such an extent that their narratives have become meaningless. No doubt, this danger has not ended completely. But they have become ineffective and soulless in the eyes of people. It is a major development.

Similarly, there is also an important development that in India, media and political groups are discussing the change of status and human rights violations in Kashmir. It is something unusual. It is a positive change. This aspect has a lot of possibilities in itself. There is one more aspect that despite Indian political position and trade interests, many countries are demanding accountability. Although these demands seem weak and ineffective they are being raised. All these aspects exhibit that we are heading towards a decisive era. It is a great challenge for us how we can utilize these possibilities.

**Q:** Which parts in your mind in these situations bear most of the responsibility?

**KA**: The most important turf is in occupied Kashmir. The respected Syed Ali Geelani Sahib had kept this movement active, strong and in the right direction with his wisdom, courage, energy, and extraordinary consistency. But he has serious health-related issues these days. We should pray for his health with all sincerity. Despite, his falling health and Indian restrictions, he has utilized every opportunity to guide his nation.

Now the need of the hour is to seek a supportive leadership for Ali Geelani. It should include people encapsulated with revolutionary ideas and constructive thoughts. This leadership should possess the qualities that include robust faith, complete awareness about the history, infinite courage, and understanding like Geelani Sahib. It should not be emotive and touchy but tolerant. The movement should not only remain effective and organized on the ground, but it should also remain popular, democratic, coherent, and have a real sense of its goal.

**Q:** Many other issues have not added to the Kashmir movement. It is not only now the right of self- determination, but issues related to the demographic characteristics of the region have also cropped up. What is your antidote to this issue?

**KA:** The objective of India's recent steps is to transform its occupation of Kashmir into permanent annexation, to harm the identity of Kashmiris, and to reduce the majority of the Muslim population into a minority. It is the worst form of imperialism. This deserves to be fully expressed and made central to the freedom struggle. The Kashmiri Muslims who had supported the Indian rule over the past many decades have confessed now clearly that India has deceived them. They lack confidence in the Indian government. But despite that, Indian policy-making institutions are contacting these people to hoodwink them again, to use them again. If Indian elements succeed, it will be dangerous. In this background, the forces who are against Indian aggression should come forward and join hands with these people and secure them.

**Q:** It apparently seems that pro-India parties, including National Conference (NC) and People's Democratic Party (PDP), who ruled Kashmir, are no more in good books of India. What is your view about the future of these parties and their leaders?

**KA**: They should be asked to ally on a common issue. Even if they do not become allies, at least they should not be allowed to become part of Indian strategy once again. It will be a useful step indeed. We observe that India is now trying to produce a new crop of pro-Indian leadership. It encouraged many people for this purpose. But so far all in vain. We must expose these people who are ready to become part of the Indian game plan. Their names, background, and shenanigans should be exposed and highlighted. But at the same time doors should remain open for new people to join the movement and they need to be engaged in discussions.

**Q:** India has been trying to link the Kashmir movement to terrorism. What is your response to Indian claims?

**KA:** We should remain mindful that any illegal occupation leads to resistance. The UN Charter also acknowledges it. Out of 200 members of the UN, 150 of them have been liberated while exercising their right to self-determination. It is a continuous process. The UN admits that if this right of self-determination is not granted through democratic means and if it is usurped through brute power, then its demand takes the shape of a resistance. The UN also recognizes this right of resistance.

It means that exercising this right of resistance to achieve the goal of the right of self-determination is not terrorism. But after 9/11, India has tried to link the Kashmir freedom movement to terrorism. Afghan Taliban which was regarded as terrorists for rejecting aggression and hostility of powerful countries, is now part of discussions and process of settlement.

**Q**: What are other necessary steps in your opinion needed to be taken immediately?

**KA**: We should consider raising a paramilitary force in AJK. The region may not have its military force, but establishing a paramilitary is the need of the hour. In case there are calls to demilitarize the region and Pakistan is asked to withdraw its forces, then there should be a local force, capable to defend the region.

It will be possible only if there is a well-trained and professional paramilitary force along with the police.

Also, there is a need to establish a Kashmir research group. It should work consistently on the Kashmir issue and provide the latest information to the Kashmir Committee of Pakistan and All Parties Kashmir Conference. It should collect, analyze, and present correctly the positive and negative statements and the writings about Kashmir. It should work as a think-tank to devise, analyze, and study alternate strategies and predict policies for different scenarios.

In India, many books and articles are published, which reflect rethinking on the issue of Kashmir and the need for its resolution. These books and articles also mention India's acts of genocide in Kashmir. These points need to be highlighted.

**Q**: There are many research groups already working. How could the new group you are recommending be different?

**KA**: Yes, there are many groups working. The one I am discussing must be effective in researching and tracing the history of the movement and the Kashmir Issue. The significance of the issue should be narrated almost in all important languages using social media platforms. Documentaries should be commissioned on various aspects of the Kashmir issue. Just holding conferences, delivering speeches and arranging social gatherings are not enough. The result-oriented conferences should be conducted, where targets are set and strategies are discussed and approved.

**Q**: Although world media has written a lot about Kashmir and criticized Indian actions over the past year, it seems not resonating with the actions of governments? What is the reason?

**KA**: There is an issue of convincing people the world over. We should approach the important political and media forums and try to motivate and facilitate them. We should research and produce different materials related to the Kashmir issue. The most important task is to send these projects through mainstream and social media to the whole world. This can be done by Pakistan based Kashmiris and their diaspora living in different countries. It is difficult to undertake such work from inside Occupied Kashmir. But there is a possibility to do it from outside systematically.

**Q**: Due to a yearlong lockdown, first due to political situation and then due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the economy in Kashmir has taken a hit. The trade across the Line of Control was stopped a year ago. Kashmir's mainstays of economy horticulture and tourism are in the doldrums. As an economist, what will you recommend to put a semblance of the economy back on rails?

**KA**: It is necessary to establish an international relief fund for Occupied Kashmir, especially, because of the coronavirus pandemic and consistent lockdown since last August. The traders and the common Kashmiri have suffered huge economic losses. They have been destroyed economically. They are surrounded by almost 1 million troops. They do not have the daily supplies and requirements necessary for a living. The medical facilities are poor. They need urgent humanitarian assistance from the international community. The people of other countries should be contacted for this purpose. Resources should be collected and sent to them assiduously. This issue needs immediate and urgent attention.