

## *Hurriyat Speaks Out*

*[Ghulam Hasan Majrooh is the Press Secretary of the All-Parties' Hurriyat Conference (Mirwaiz), a conglomerate of various political parties in Jammu and Kashmir supporting the right to Kashmiri self-determination. He is also the General Secretary of the Ittihadul Muslimeen, a largely Shia political party, whose Chief Patron is the senior Kashmiri leader, Maulana Abbas Ansari. In this interview with Yoginder Sikand, he talks about his work and about media perceptions and depictions of the Kashmir conflict. Excerpts :]*

**Q: What exactly is the work that your media cell does?**

**A:** We report human rights violations as well as activities related to our movement for self-determination and react to statements issued by political parties and leaders related to the issue of Jammu and Kashmir. We send these reports to various newspapers and news agencies as well as carry them on our newly set-up website [www.hurriyat.net](http://www.hurriyat.net).

**Q: What do you feel about media reporting about the Kashmir issue?**

**A:** With a few exceptions, neither the Indian nor the Western media depicts the issue in a proper light or represents the voices of the majority of the people of Jammu and Kashmir. The dominant Western media, for instance, has its own interests. They do not have sympathy for the subjugated Kashmiris. America is interested principally in expanding its markets and promoting its commercial and strategic interests, and since India is such a huge potential market for the West, the Western media would not like to oppose the Indian stance on Kashmir. So, increasingly, our legitimate struggle for self-determination is being wrongly branded in the media as 'terrorism', in the Indian and Western media.

**Q: You mention that your media cell reports instances of human rights violations in Kashmir by agencies of the state. But what about similar violations by militants?**

**A:** The Hurriyat Conference is very clear that all forms of terrorism, no matter who perpetrates it, is thoroughly condemnable. The killing of innocents, no matter what their religion, is a heinous crime, something that Islam roundly denounces. In the past, when some innocent Hindus in our state have been killed we have issued statements condemning this.

**Q: In the independent Jammu and Kashmir that you seek, what status would the religious minorities, such as Sikhs, Buddhists, Dalits and Hindus, enjoy?**

**A:** Religious minorities would have equal rights. They are also part and parcel of our land, our culture and our history. We are not against the Hindus, unlike what the media portrays. To cite a recent instance, just three weeks ago, senior Hurriyat leaders went to Kheer Bhavani, the most important Pandit shrine in Kashmir, where they met with Pandits who had come to celebrate a festival and wished them on the occasion. I have some Pandit neighbours and we go to each others' homes and enjoy very cordial relations. The Kashmiri Pandits are part of our Kashmiri culture, they are our brethren. They must live here, because Kashmir is also their homeland. So, we want them to return and they

have also the right to. The issue of Kashmir is not simply a Muslim one. It is an issue of the people of Jammu and Kashmir as a whole.

**Q: But do you think that as long as violence continues the Pandits will return?**

**A:** We certainly want them back. However, we cannot give them any guarantee of safety, just as we Kashmiri Muslims have no such guarantee in the presence of some seven hundred thousand Indian troops in our state.

**Q: Do you think a peaceful solution of the Kashmir dispute is indeed possible?**

**A:** This is precisely what we want. The head of the Hurriyat Conference, Mirwaiz Umar Farooq, has said that in the changed global context, particularly after 9/11, dialogue, not war, is the only way out. War cannot be a solution as that will lead to total destruction, now that both India and Pakistan are nuclear powers. India must recognize that Kashmir is a disputed issue. If the Indian and Pakistani leadership want to save the region from destruction they must solve the Kashmir dispute in accordance with the aspirations of the people of the state of Jammu and Kashmir, because otherwise nuclear war is a real possibility. Unfortunately, however, although we have had three rounds of talks with Indian leaders, there has been no real positive response from their side.

I think Musharraf's four-point formula is worth considering as a starting point for a gradual and peaceful solution of the conflict. The Hurriyat Conference supports this. President Musharraf has talked about demilitarization and joint management of Jammu and Kashmir and soft borders.

**Q: But the other faction of the Hurriyat Conference, headed by Sayyed Ali Shah Gilani, has a different perception, isn't it?**

**A:** Gilani Sahib is an elder, a leader, and we respect him. Although he argues that dialogue cannot provide a solution, we say otherwise. But we ultimately have the same goal in mind. Gilani says that Indian forces should first leave Kashmir and then talks can be arranged. The Mirwaiz puts it somewhat differently. He says that we'll dialogue with India, have talks with them, and convince them to leave Kashmir.

**Q: But what sort of solution do you envisage?**

**A:** The solution has to satisfy all three parties to the Jammu and Kashmir dispute—Pakistan, India and the peoples of Jammu and Kashmir. India must live up to its promise of allowing the people of Jammu and Kashmir to determine their own political future. India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, made such a public promise and even took the Kashmir issue to the United Nations, where again he vowed that India would live up to this promise.

**Q: But how does one satisfy the aspirations of the people of Jammu and Kashmir, given the tremendous diversity in the state, in terms of religion, caste, sect and ethnicity?**

**A:** True, this is a very difficult task. But such a solution must necessarily be arrived at through dialogue. This is very much possible if all parties are sincere. Any solution of the issue must be acceptable to all the people of the

state-not just the Kashmiris, but also to people living in Jammu, Ladakh, Gilgit, Baltistan and other parts of the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir.

**Q: The Hurriyat Conference projects itself as the principal representative of the people of Jammu and Kashmir. But is that really true? For instance, are the Ladakhi Buddhists or the Hindus of Jammu with you?**

**A:** We don't say that all the people of Jammu or Ladakh are with us. What we do say, however, is that the issue of the political status of the state is of concern to them as well. Their future is linked to the larger problem of Jammu and Kashmir and so we must take them along with us.

**Q: You advocate an independent Jammu and Kashmir, but what if the people of Jammu or Ladakh do not wish to join such an entity?**

**A:** That is an issue that will be tackled when it comes up. We must take the opinions of people in Jammu and Ladakh and if they do not want to be in Kashmir we can see what to do. But our point is that the whole of Jammu and Kashmir is a disputed territory, not just the Kashmir valley. We would like an arrangement that all peoples of Jammu and Kashmir can agree on and which would ensure the unity of the state.

**Q: But do you seriously feel that the people of Jammu and Ladakh would like to live in what may be a Kashmiri-dominated state?**

**A:** If so many different communities can live together in India, then why not in an independent Jammu and Kashmir? But, in future, if some groups want to be separate, that is an issue that can be decided then.

**Q: Some militant groups involved in the armed conflict in Kashmir characterize the conflict as essentially religious, rather than political. They see it as a war between Islam and disbelief (kufr). What do you say about this way of understanding the conflict?**

**A:** This characterization of the conflict is wrong. The roots of the conflict go back to 1947, when the Hindu majority parts of India became the Indian Dominion and the Muslim-majority areas became Pakistan. So, it is a political issue. Or, should I say, going beyond that, it is a human issue, a humanitarian issue, one related to the basic human right of the people of Jammu and Kashmir to determine their own political future.

**Q: Do you think religious extremists in both India and Pakistan, Muslim as well as Hindu, would ever allow for a peaceful resolution of the Kashmir issue?**

**A:** Some such extremist elements in both countries, of course, do not want such a solution, but then many ordinary political leaders, too, feel the same way. There are also some agencies in both countries that are very active in Kashmir and who want to see the continuation of the conflict, because their own vested interests are linked to this.

**Q: The Indian media generally projects political groups such as yours as 'anti-Indian' and 'anti-Hindu'. How do you respond to this charge?**

**A:** This is wholly wrong. We have no hatred for ordinary Hindus or Indians. We love the Indian people. We have no quarrel with them. Many Hindus come to Kashmir, to work or for travel, and they are treated with respect by ordinary

Kashmiris. We are only opposed to the Indian state for denying us our inherent right to political self-determination. We are all for peace, but with freedom and justice. We want India to prosper, but it must act on its promise to let the people of Jammu and Kashmir to determine their own political future.

**Q: What are your views on recent developments in Pakistan that have led to increasing instability there-for instance, the recent massacre at the Lal Masjid in Islamabad?**

**A:** I don't think it is right that some people hold others hostage in a mosque and say they will establish an Islamic state thereby. How can that be?

**Q: But what do you feel about the way Musharraf handled the Lal Masjid issue?**

**A:** Pakistan is an independent country, and so if the government feels that its security is under threat it has the right to respond. It's their own issue.

**Q: And what about happenings elsewhere in the Muslim world, such as Iraq? The Ittehadul Muslimeen, of which you are General Secretary, is largely Shia in composition. How do you view recent events in Pakistan and Iraq? What do these mean for the Shias and for Shia-Sunni relations there as well as in Kashmir?**

**A:** In Pakistan there have been some attacks on Shias, but the majority of the Pakistani people are opposed to this sort of communal violence. The United States, however, is bent on fuelling Shia-Sunni conflicts, to divide and rule. This they are trying in Iraq, for instance. However, the Iraqi Shia religious leadership has been opposing this effort. Ayatollah Seistani, the most popular Iraqi Shia leader, has consistently appealed to the Shias not to fall prey to American machinations and to seek to maintain brotherly relations with the country's Sunnis.

**Q: How do you look at the way that Arab governments, mostly closely allied to the United States, have responded to American imperialist aggression in Iraq?**

**A:** It is really tragic that leaders of many Muslim countries are not raising their voices against this. They have mortgaged their countries, their resources and even their religion to the United States, having become its slaves. But this will not last long.

**Q: Since you raise the issue of Hizbullah in the context of the anti-imperialist struggle, what do you feel about fatwas delivered by certain influential Saudi Wahhabi ulema denouncing the Hizbullah, principally because it is a largely Shia movement and because Shias are considered as apostates and heretics by many Wahhabis?**

**A:** If some maulvis' views are such, if they are against the welfare of Islam and the Muslims, they are enemies of Islam, even if they might be considered to be great Saudi religious scholars. They are made-in-America mullahs, misinterpreting Islam to serve American interests.

**Q: How do you respond to charges in the media that seek to link Islam with terrorism? In particular, what do you feel about the way in which the Kashmir conflict is increasingly being presented in the**

**media as what is labeled as 'Islamic terrorism', rather than as a national liberation struggle?**

**A:** Islam is being wrongly interpreted as being synonymous with terrorism, while actually it teaches quite the opposite. It stands for peace and justice for all. The unrest in much of the Muslim world owes principally to widespread oppressive conditions that prevail there. The media is making things immensely worse through negative portrayals of Islam and Muslims. Any Muslim who sports a beard is immediately dubbed as a 'fundamentalist'. And in our case, our struggle for freedom is wrongly branded as 'Islamic extremism' in order to delegitimise it. When people rise up in revolt against oppression, they are branded as 'terrorists'. Indian Army sources claim that there are only 1500 militants in Kashmir, but if that is the case then why are there more than seven hundred thousand Indian armed forces stationed here? Why have these forces been given draconian powers? What about the thousands of our people who have been killed, maimed, loicked up in jails or have disappeared? They are victims of state terrorism. □□□