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## **Unlocking the People of Kashmir**

Just a few months ago, the entire world was under lockdown. Governments shut down their cities and states in order to combat the spread of the coronavirus. However, as countries are slowly reopening up again, some places are still under lockdown for a very different reason. Located in northern India, the region Kashmir has been under a security lockdown for over 1 year, and the people living in the region continue to suffer as a result of this. With limited access to technology and the internet, the region is essentially isolated from the world. To uplift the people in Kashmir and ensure they have access to basic human rights and to address the food insecurities in the region, it is necessary to change legislation that leaves the people of Kashmir vulnerable, end the lockdown currently in place in the region, and work with various non-governmental organizations that work with food security issues.

Kashmir is in northern India, bordered by Pakistan to the west, Afghanistan to the north, and China to the east. It is a very mountainous region, and boasts some of the tallest mountains in the world, including the Great Himalayan zone (Encyclopedia Britannica, October 2019). The region has a population of 12,548,926 people, with 27.38% of people living in urban areas and 72.62% of people living in rural areas. Currently, Kashmir exists as a union territory of India. It is under the administration of a Lieutenant Governor appointed by the President of India. The Governor is aided by a Chief Minister and a Council of Ministers. There is also a small Legislative Assembly, where members are elected every five years; however, these elections have not occurred since Kashmir became a union territory. Kashmir became a union territory of India in August of 2019, resulting in it losing its status of being a “state,” and no longer having their own government or police force. Instead, the central government of India governs the territory from afar (The Diplomat, April 2020).

As Kashmir continues to change over time, families tend to stay with the joint-family system or adopt the nuclear system. In a joint-family system, several generations of a family live together. In a nuclear family, only the parents and their children live together. As the majority of the Kashmir population is Muslim, Islam and its practices have helped the joint-family system stay intact. But, with modernization many people have turned to a nuclear family while continuing the practice of Islam. To Indians, family is an extremely important cultural value, and it is custom for children, after they become independent adults, to take care of their aging parents. When it comes to eating, rice is an essential part of every meal. It is often paired with meat, resulting in many Kashmirian cuisines to be non-vegetarian. People also eat curries with

turmeric and yogurt as part of their meals. Access to affordable and quality healthcare is extremely difficult in Kashmir. With no access to the internet, inexperienced doctors struggle to diagnose patients if they have abnormal symptoms. In hospitals, there is a shortage of medicine and essential equipment necessary to treat illnesses (The Wire, January 2020). As the region has remained under security lockdown for over a year, doctors are unable to contact their patients that are suffering from cancer and other fatal illnesses. Important and urgent surgeries are unable to occur, as the communication networks between people have been severed. Ideally, students in Kashmir have access to the public education system. In the status quo however, schools and colleges have been shut down as the security lockdown in the country continues (Global Citizen, August 2019).

Agriculture is extremely important to the people of Kashmir, who are also known as Kashmiris. Although only 18% of the land in the region is cultivated, agriculture and sectors related to it engage 80% of the workforce (Research Gate, September 2014). Despite employing the majority of workers, the average farm size is 0.62 hectares. Comparatively, the average farm size in India is 1.15 hectares, almost double the size. Since the region is mountainous but has several plains and fields, Kashmir is able to produce a wide variety of crops, ranging from grains to fruits to silk. The primary crops grown in the region are rice, maize, barley, and wheat. In addition, Kashmir is the only producer of saffron in the subcontinent of India. However, the limited land used for farming in Kashmir is rapidly decreasing. According to The Kashmir Monitor in an article published in November of 2019, Kashmir has lost 78,700 hectares of cultivated land over the past four years due to urbanization. As more infrastructure is constructed, farming land is being lost. With this loss, many people are losing their primary source of income and food.

For decades, India and Pakistan have had an ongoing conflict with no end in sight. Unfortunately, Kashmir is the setting for many battles between the two countries. This is primarily because of the location of Kashmir and its history with both of the countries. In 1947, India and Pakistan became independent from Great Britain. Since then, the countries have fought three wars over the regions of Kashmir and Jammu. At the end of the first war in 1949, the United Nations stopped the fighting with a brokered ceasefire. Since then, Kashmir has been a place of violence, as the countries continue to fight for control. Kashmir is a region with many ethnicities, and each of the smaller regions in Kashmir have their own goals for who should govern them(The Conversation, March 2019). Since India and Pakistan have managed to divide the whole region into different areas, India has control over three different regions from the originally disputed territory. While the first two, known as Jammu and Ladakh, would like to remain a part of India, the Kashmir Valley wants independence from India.

The Muslims in the Kashmir region compose about 97% of the population, while Hindus make about 2% (India Today, August 2019). Since 1989, Kashmiris have continued to fight for independence from Indian rule. Many violent protests have occurred, resulting in Kashmir becoming a militarized zone that is occupied by Indian forces. While responding to these protests, India has committed many human rights

violations. People from India and Pakistan have attacked the Kashmir region and innocent civilians multiple times, leaving Kashmiris in a state of fear and insecurity.

Indian security forces especially have committed many human rights violations in Kashmir. While responding to violent protests by Kashmiris, Indian soldiers have killed many civil society groups who were using their freedom of speech to express their opinions (Human Rights Watch, June 2018).

Thousands of citizens are in detention after the region lost its autonomy in 2019. In addition, journalists have an extremely difficult time staying safe and sharing their stories while in Kashmir. The region's internet connection is extremely weak, but is definitely an improvement from when they did not have any internet for 7 months late last year (Ozy, April 2020). This makes it extremely difficult for journalists to share their stories about the terrible situations Kashmiris have to live through daily. The government has recently targeted several journalists in the region, and will likely sever journalists' last connection to the outside world in the next few months. Journalists who are caught documenting their experiences or communicating with other news agencies are often charged with criminal offenses and are sent to jail. The people of Kashmir are unable to have basic human rights, including the freedoms of speech, protest, and press.

However, there are several solutions to ensure Kashmiris have their basic human rights and a stable source of food. To address the many human rights violations in the region, the United Nations will need to work with the Indian government and address several pieces of legislation. In addition, ending the lockdown on the region would better protect the people of Kashmir and their food source. Finally, to ensure that Kashmiris have enough food to sustain themselves, several non-governmental organizations should work with community leaders in the region. By enacting these three solutions, the people of Kashmir will be able to have an increased amount of freedom in their lives, while having a constant food source they can depend on.

The first step to addressing the human rights violations in Kashmir is to address and change significant legislation that harms the Kashmiris. The first is the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), which allows Indian soldiers to shoot and kill in violent situations, arrest people without a warrant, and to detain people indefinitely. This type of unlimited and unchecked power allows for human rights violations to occur with no justice for the people of Kashmir. For years, human rights organizations have argued that this Act should be repealed (FirstPost, April 2019). To ensure that the human rights abuses decrease in Kashmir, the AFSPA should be repealed. For this to occur, both the legislative body and the Prime Minister of the Indian government need to agree to do so. To encourage these people to repeal the act, the United Nations should pressure the Indian government. Currently, the United Nations has published reports on the human rights abuses in India but has not acted in any way. By working with the Indian government, the AFSPA could be repealed. This would hold the soldiers who commit human rights abuses accountable for their wrong doings. With this extra protection for the people of Kashmir and the soldiers knowing that they will be prosecuted if they abuse others, the amount of human rights abuses would decrease and the people of Kashmir would feel safe and be able to openly practice basic human rights.

Another significant piece of legislation that should be modified to protect the human rights of Kashmiris is Article 370. Article 370 granted Kashmir a certain amount of autonomy- it was an Indian state but had its own flag, constitution, and the freedom to make its own laws. When this Article was revoked in August of last year, the region was stripped of all its special privileges and became a union territory under India's control (BBC, August 2019). To protect the people of Kashmir, Article 370 should be reenacted. By doing so, the people of Kashmir will have more control over how their region is run and will be able to make decisions for themselves. With the revoking of Article 370, thousands of Indian forces mobilized to the region, which is causing the human rights violations to increase. Article 370 allows for India to still have control over their territory and make decisions for the region, but choices that will directly impact the people of Kashmir the most would be made by people elected by Kashmiris.

Additionally, another solution to help the people of Kashmir is to end the security lockdown. Since August of 2019, Kashmir has been under lockdown and people have been unable to freely leave the region. Access to technology and the internet is extremely limited, so citizens are barely able to interact with people not in Kashmir. Colleges and schools have been shut down for over a year, in addition to businesses that have closed as a protest against the lockdown (Al Jazeera, November 2019). As the lockdown was beginning, thousands of soldiers were sent to the region. Whenever Kashmiris protest against the lockdown now, they are met by violence from the soldiers. Ending the lockdown would have multiple benefits for the people of Kashmir. First, businesses would open up again. Business owners and their employees would have their source of income back, and would be able to sell goods to the people that need them. Schools and other educational facilities would be reopened, allowing students access to full educational rights. In addition, it would be easier for people to get information in and out of Kashmir. If people are able to freely move out of Kashmir, they will be able to document and share their experiences in the region. They would also be able to contact different human rights organizations to receive help in delivering justice for Kashmiris. To end the lockdown, the central government of India needs to remove most of the security forces currently in the Kashmir region. With fewer soldiers, the people of Kashmir will also be able to freely protest with less fear of being severely harmed. Additionally, when the lockdown first began, people were afraid that they would not have enough food so they bought all the goods in stores. As the lockdown continues to go on, people are struggling to find enough food to sustain themselves and their families. By ending the lockdown, people will be able to go to different businesses to purchase food and other essentials.

The third solution for food insecurity and human rights violations in Kashmir is to work with non-governmental organizations to ensure that Kashmiris have a stable food source. Due to rapid urbanization, the farming land in Kashmir is quickly disappearing. Residential areas, shopping malls, and new schools have been constructed on areas that used to be cultivated for crops (The Third Pole, February 2016). Food security is becoming an increasingly prevalent problem in people's lives, especially in rural areas where a loss of farmland can mean a loss of jobs and money that was invested into irrigation infrastructure (Greater Kashmir, July 2017). To help provide food to the people of Kashmir, the Indian government needs to work with non-governmental organizations, also known as NGOs, to produce

enough food. An example of a NGO that could provide help for the people of Kashmir is The World Bank, which is an international institution that works with different partners to address food security issues all over the world. The World Bank is already co-financing a project with the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM) to help support Indians living in rural areas, and have been effective in running public kitchens and providing fresh food (World Bank, April 2020). Additionally, NGOs already based in India, including Child in Need Institute and Katha, could expand their efforts to the region of Kashmir and work with community leaders in the area to address poverty and food insecurity. Leaders and volunteers in the region would be essential to distributing food properly. NGOs also need food supplies given to them at low or no cost. Currently, the price of grains and other essentials necessary for producing food is too expensive for these organizations (Greater Kashmir, April 2020). The government should reduce the price of these goods so that they are more accessible to NGOs, or even supply the grains. The organizations will then be able to set up initiatives, including canteens and soup kitchens, to provide food for people in Kashmir.

Overall, it is clear that human rights and food security are issues that are directly connected. Without protections in place that ensure people are able to use their rights, their source of food is in danger. By changing legislation that harms the people of Kashmir, ending the security lockdown that is causing millions of people to suffer, and working with non-governmental organizations, the people of Kashmir will have their rights better protected, while having a sustainable source of food. Since 1947, Kashmir has been a region filled with violence and conflict. Innocent civilians are often caught in the crossfire between India and Pakistan. However, by enacting these three critical solutions, the people of Kashmir will be able to lead happier and healthier lives.

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