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PRESS RELEASE

"American Media Bias Cited in Coverage of Terrorism against India"

For what may be termed as a historical event on April 26, a Panel Discussion on Media Coverage of Terrorism in India and Pakistan, Indian American community packed the First Amendment Room at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C. to listen to the panelists. While descriptions varied, there was unanimity among panelists that the media coverage, especially in India and Pakistan, needs improvement.

The Panel Discussion was sponsored by the newly established "Center for Indic Studies" at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, and was moderated by its Director, Professor Bal Ram Singh.

The panel consisted of Ambassador Dennis Kux, a senior scholar at the Woodrow Wilson Center of International Scholars, Selig Harrison, a journalist turned scholar and Director of National Security at the Center for International Policy, Professor Romesh Diwan of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Professor Chandrakant Panse, Director, Media Watch group of Friends of India Society International, and Dr. Rita Frenchman, Governing Body Member, American Association of Physicians of India (AAPI).

Representative Frank Pallone, D-NJ, who was to participate in the panel discussion could not make to the event, but sent a three-page statement instead. In this time of overwhelming grief and reparation in the US, there are at least 53,000 families in India that can comprehend the great suffering caused by terrorism in Kashmir. Many communities, including Muslims, Sikhs and Pandits, have been tormented by Pakistan-backed Islamic militants for decades. These terrorist acts by Islamic militants in Kashmir have resulted in overwhelming numbers of cold-blooded murders in an efforts to eliminate non-Muslims from Kashmir.

In his introductory remarks, Singh said that although terrorism is being debated in the media as if it is a term that needs a lot of explanation. It has very simple meaning terrorizing people to promote a cause. If terrorism is opposed, it can not be justified by a cause. He pointed out several myths about terrorism, such as terrorism is result of poverty, springs from the lack of democracy, or breeds in territorial disputes. There are many examples of such situations (Tibet, Taiwan, China, Koreas, etc) where terrorism is not resorted to solve the problems.

Singh also asserted that terrorism is not religion-specific. There are people of various religion who are involved in terrorism all over the world. The only difference being that there are some religions which sanction, or are at least being used, and that should be distinguished.

Selig Harrison, a veteran journalist who is well versed with India and Pakistan said that the good news was that the American press had finally discovered the ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence - the Pakistani spy agency), particularly, the activities of the ISI in the last stages of Soviet occupation of Afghan areas, providing active support in bringing jihadis from all over the world and help them to train as terrorists.

He pointed out that American media did not really follow up even when the Indian airliner was hijacked a few years ago, and all the evidence clearly pointed to the involvement of groups supported by ISI. Harrison thought that American angle to the ISI activities was brought forth when the case of Daniel Pearl came up. Even so, the nature of activities which ISI is carrying out in Kashmir has not been the focus of the American media.

Ambassador Dennis Kux, who has had diplomatic assignments both in India and Pakistan, thought the coverage of South Asia in some national newspapers is pretty good. I think it is reasonably good, and when you have a big event as 9/11, the coverage on Afghanistan and Pakistan, as of the Middle East, was terrific. There was more reporting of Pakistan through the media than the state department. There were more journalists there. At that point they started going below the surface and get to know about the ISI.

Dr. Rita Frenchman, a physician by profession but active in Indian community issues, however, thought that the US media has never been honest in its coverage of India. It tries to find everything negative it can about India. She thought media in the rest of the world, such as BBC, provides impartial and fairer coverage. Dr. Frenchman believes that news agencies CNN, Fox News, etc., have to echo US foreign policy. But in the long-run it is only going to harm the India-US relations. She felt that both US and India should work together as both countries have the same common enemy, Islamic fundamentalism.

The role of media in the effective sustenance of a society was emphasized. Singh pointed out that media is on the three



Picture: Panelists of the Media Coverage of Terrorism in India and Pakistan. From left to right, Chandrakant Panse, Rita Frenchman, Bal Ram Singh, Selig Harrison, Romesh Diwan, and Dennis Kux (partial).

pillars in a modern functioning democracy. He said that media has been institutionalized in the democratic system of governance. Of course, that gives a lot of power, but a lot of responsibility also. One of the requirements of such responsibility is for them to be fair, balanced, factual and truthful.

In this regard, Harrison retorted: I am afraid to say that the American media of that event (December 13 attack on the Indian parliament) did not reflect the magnitude of that event. Particularly, I have been distressed by the fact that the way in which this was covered did not define that fact that Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed, which were identified by India as the groups responsible for carrying out this event, groups which are primarily composed of Pakistanis. Harrison thought the nature of the acuteness and seriousness of that event was not accurately conveyed and more broadcast was needed.

Professor Chandrakant Panse, Director, Media Watch project of Friends of India Society International, reminded everyone of late Daniel Pearl, an adventurous, careful journalist who lost his life to ISI, while discovering the role of the Pakistani agency in terrorism. He cited New York Times and Boston Globe to point out that 4,000 Pakistani army officers were manning Kashmir desk of ISI. These officers are reportedly being shifted, and media is not questioning as to what were they doing for all these years? According to Panse the role of ISI in terrorism is crystal clear.

Professor Diwan suggested that media could play both positive and negative roles. He thought that even though there are some good people in media, something is missing somewhere when a story is picked up, and only part of the information is presented.

Diwan theorized that terrorism has two parties; terrorist and the victim. Terrorists have an intent for their action but carry it out in a sneaky way, whereas antiterrorism action is done openly. In his opinion, media must work hard to distinguish the two actions. Even though it is easier to report on the antiterrorist action, media must go deeper in reporting evil designs of terrorists, their network, and their ideology of hatred. Media must not help terrorists by helping them create the terror.

In case of India and Pakistan, Professor Diwan thought, a distinction must be made between a free and democratic society of India and a parochial and dictatorial society of Pakistan. He pointed out a systematic terrorism in Pakistan practiced since its creation in 1947. He cited ethnic cleansing as an evidence of this practice, as the minority (Christian, Hindus and Sikhs) population in Pakistan has been reduced from 23% in 1947 to 2% in about 50 years. He emphasized that Pakistan has wiped out the entire minority population and the media has not informed the public about it.

In Ambassador Kux's opinion though there is a fair coverage of current events of terrorism in India and Pakistan at least in major national newspapers (New York Times, Washington Post, Los Angeles Times) of the US. He explained that the local media in US does not cover anything beyond their local events. In the modern era of internet, he thought anyone can get to read newspapers from all over the world, so whether US media sources cover world's largest democracy or not should not bother the Indian American community too much. He was also critical of the TV culture of 10-second news spots which lack substantial discussion.

He challenged the Indian American community to play a role in the education system of this country, because if you look at the curriculum in the high schools and colleges, where does Asia fit in? You do not have much coverage in social science, or history, or geography. He thought that lack the basic of knowledge about India exists not in general but in the school system.

Professor Singh in his remarks emphasized that India should not be considered just another country, especially in the United States which has been leader of the free world for several decades. India has played a major role in promoting freedom and pluralism for several thousands of years, and still is a continuously living culture. The media should examine India historically, geographically, and socially in all possible ways. The evidence of India's importance is in the fact that India is the only country in the whole history of the world that has an ocean named after it. Even British who at one time had such a vast empire that there was no sunset in their kingdom, but could not have an ocean named after them.

Singh exhorted the media, especially the Indian media, to present India's values of pluralism, tolerance, and human rights, which resonate so well with those of the US, to the rest of the world, not for the sake of India alone but for the sake of peace in the entire world.

This Panel Discussion at the National Press Club attracted print and electronic media, scores of Indian American community members, and diplomats from both India and Pakistan, including the Indian Ambassador at large, Honorable BK Agnihotri, who is based in New York city.