

## From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

### Kashmir: a new strategy on the anvil

*The new all-party committee on Kashmir will help keep the politicians honest in dealing with this grave crisis.*

Following a useless day-long session in Srinagar, Kashmir, where India's major political party leaders assembled on March 8 to discuss and formulate a plan to quell the disturbances that have crippled the state of Jammu and Kashmir, the government of Prime Minister V.P. Singh announced the formation of an all-party committee to "provide political inputs on Kashmir." Minister of Railways George Fernandes has been entrusted with the additional portfolio of "Minister-in-Charge of Kashmir."

Formation of the committee came after prolonged consultations. In informal discussion with newsmen on Jan. 21, V.P. Singh had first referred to the need for all-party participation in formulating a strategy to deal with the growing internal crisis in Kashmir. In subsequent weeks the crisis has only intensified, in spite of the dismissal of the discredited state government and firm administrative measures taken by the newly installed Governor Jagmohan. The militants' success in gathering men, women, and children to voice the demand for secession from India has seen no let-up.

According to Fernandes, the all-party committee will not interfere with the state's daily affairs. It will function as an advisory council and a way of working out a consensus "as one moves along," he says. Fernandes also points out that the committee will not come into conflict with either the governor or the Home Ministry.

But besides the built-in constraints

that permit the committee to function only within a rather narrowly defined perimeter, the partisan jockeying and exercise in scoring debaters' points robbed the March 8 meeting of credibility, and raises a question about what the committee will actually be able to achieve.

In Srinagar, top national leaders showed that despite the gravity of the situation which had brought them there, they were clearly more interested in squeezing political mileage out of it than in solving problems.

It is evident that the Congress (I) party, now in the opposition for the last 15 weeks, is feeling the need to counter the obvious accusation that it was their own 40 years of misrule which is responsible for the present state of affairs in Kashmir. The Congress (I) has targeted the government's appointment of Jagmohan, who is considered a hardline law-and-order man, as governor, and charges that it was his decision to dissolve the state assembly that gave rise to the militant activities. These moves have alienated Kashmiris because they indicated the *ad hoc* nature of Delhi's policy toward Kashmir, Congress (I) claims, while at the same time the release of five extremists as ransom for the kidnaped daughter of Home Minister Mufti Sayeed in December gave the militants a boost.

There is no doubt that the militants are in full cry now. According to available reports, when daytime curfew was relaxed in Srinagar in mid-February, thousands of people began

to congregate in the streets chanting for "freedom" from Indian rule. On Feb. 25, a human wave of more than 200,000 men, women, and children, boarding all kinds of vehicles, went to Chaar-e-Sharif, a Sufi shrine, to seek the saint's blessing. All along their way, they waved flags of Pakistan while the various militant groups shouted anti-India slogans and sang their "choruses of freedom."

The human wave became a daily phenomenon in the following weeks. Each day, thousands of people, organized by the militant groups in corners of the city, marched to the United Nations Military Observer's office in Srinagar to hand over a memorandum demanding enforcement of the U.N. Resolutions of 1948 and 1956 which call for holding a plebiscite in Kashmir. Soon, the demonstrators were clashing with security forces, and a day-long curfew has had to be reimposed.

The circumstances, though certainly greatly exacerbated during the last two years, reflect the policy failures in Kashmir since 1947. Almost in unison, Kashmiris denounced the policies of Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi, and her son Rajiv Gandhi, who, they say, with the help of a handful of Kashmiri families such as the Abdullahs, have kept political power out of the hands of the population.

One prominent result of such failed policies is the unprecedented level of corruption in the state. The state has also been kept devoid of industries, other than the traditional cottage industries and tourism, so that unemployment and cynicism are widespread.

If it is to make a useful contribution, the all-party committee will have to look through all the sins of the past and rise above petty political feuds to chalk out a concrete program for bettering the average Kashmiri's life.