

EU MPs' day out in Srinagar: Shikara ride amid protests, briefing on J&K, meeting civil society

NAVEED IQBAL Srinagar, October 29

AS THEY FLEW to Srinagar Tuesday morning, where a shutdown was being observed by local residents amid clashes with security forces, the first foreign delegation to visit Kashmir since the revocation of J&K's special status by the Centre was busy browsing through a five-page brief on the state and the situation on the ground.

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In the document titled 'Briefing notes and background on Kashmir', the government provided the visiting EU MPs with a condensed account of events that unfolded in the Valley over the last three months.

Discussing the abrogation of Article 370, the brief states: "Article 370 was not mandated by any multilateral body or agreement. Its existence guaranteed neither economic debt nor social justice."

It states that 91% of Kashmir is now free of all restrictions but "keeping in mind the threat posed by terrorist organisations in using mobile connectivity to organise terror actions," connectivity is being restored gradually.

The document also underscores the treatment of religious minorities in Pakistan and the use of legislation, such as the blasphemy law, quoting reports by international news organisations, such as the BBC.

Stating that the government's "full focus" is on ensuring normalcy, the brief notes: "Some restrictions on communications and preventive detentions have been made at the local level based on the ground situation with a view to maintain public law and order."

The brief also says that schools are open but makes no mention of colleges and businesses. Additionally, it states that over the last fortnight, over 2,50,000 patients have visited different hospitals and that the government is allowing journalists to carry out work through a "media centre".

The EU MPs are in Kashmir for a day. Asked if the time would be sufficient to observe the situation, one of the delegates told *The Indian Express*: "This is not a very long visit. Let's hope so."

After landing in Srinagar amid high security, with roads leading out of the airport cordoned off by J&K police, the MPs' first meeting was held at the 15 Corps headquarters at Badamiyah Cantonment. Later, once section of the group went sightseeing in Srinagar and the other met civil society members at the Lalit hotel at Gurpar.

The brief for the EU delegation, meanwhile, begins with an introduction to J&K's relationship with India, starting with the document of accession. "Lord Mountbatten accepted accession as uncon-

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