

Government appeasing separatists: Lt. Gen S.K. Sinha

Former Jammu and Kashmir governor Lt. Gen. (retd.) S.K. Sinha has accused the government of going out of its way to 'appease' separatists in the valley when it should have countered their 'absurd propaganda' that land transfer to the Amarnath shrine board was going to change the demographic profile of Kashmir.

'What we are seeing in the valley is the assertion of fundamentalist and intolerant forces and the union government is doing nothing to counter it. In fact it is going out of its way to appease them,' Sinha, currently living in [New Delhi](#) after laying down office on June 25, told IANS in an exclusive interview at his residence.

'Like (German propagandist) Joseph Goebbels, they (separatists and clerics) keep telling a lie over and over again and we (government), instead of countering the lie, try to pamper and protect them,' Sinha said.

It was during Sinha's tenure as governor and the ex-officio head of the Shri Amarnath Shrine Board (SASB) that the government in May decided to lease out 40 hectares of forest land at the Baltal base camp for erecting prefabricated shelters, a decision that led to protests in both Jammu and the Kashmir Valley for three months and left 50 dead and hundreds injured.

The government Sunday agreed to let the shrine body use forest land for the duration of the pilgrimage to the Amarnath shrine in the valley dedicated to Lord Shiva -- while the deal ended the 61-day Jammu protests, it was resented by Muslim groups in the valley who have called 'peaceful protests' against the decision.

'I had no role in the transfer of the land. For three years the file was pending with the cabinet. How could I have exercised undue influence? And what influence does a governor have in the last week of office?' asserted Sinha, countering the general belief that he was responsible for the controversial step that led to so much unrest in the state.

Sinha says there is nothing unusual in giving out or leasing forest land.

'Forest land has been given to Reliance for erecting communication towers, to the electricity department for transmission lines and the education department for building university campuses. All these transfers took place on the same day land was leased out to SASB.'

'Yes, I did ask for the yatra to be extended up to two months and for more security as well. What's wrong with it?' Sinha queried.

'The number of pilgrims was increasing and finally tourism is a money-spinner. Do we question why the number of pilgrims in Ajmer Sharif is increasing every year or if the number of devotees have to be restricted in Badrinath?' exclaimed Sinha, expressing disgust at the charge that he had ulterior motives during his gubernatorial stint in the state.

In his reckoning, the union government was being too 'sensitive' about a sensitive state.

'We were trying to appease the likes of Syed Ali Shah Geelani which did not happen. The

government completely mishandled the situation. When the separatists talked of economic blockade why didn't the government act?'

'They could have resorted to air sorties and taken the wind out of their sails and called their bluff.'

In Sinha's final analysis, the concept of 'Kashmiriyat' - Kashmir's unique philosophy of religious co-existence - was going on extremely well and there was a marked improvement in the ground situation in the valley.

'The fundamentalists saw the land transfer as an ideal opportunity to capitalise as they were being increasingly marginalized. And nothing was done to counter it. The yellow press journalism in the valley stoked it further and the mainstream secular press misinterpreted facts,' says Sinha.

'In fact, not just the media, the government and political parties did little to counter the absurd propaganda that the demographic profile of Kashmir was going to change. What we (government) did was bend back to appease.'

Sinha is not sure if he misjudged the strong reaction the cabinet decision to lease land to SASB would evoke.

'I did not light the fire,' he said.

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