

KARAN SINGH BACKS CENTRE'S MOVE

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As Congress leaders continued to speak in different voices on Jammu and Kashmir, party veteran and former ruler of J&K Karan Singh on Thursday said he supported the Centre's move to remove Article 35A and make Ladakh a Union Territory. He, however, stressed that the decision should not lead to any communal tension and J&K should be restored as a State as soon as possible.

"The drastic measure, however, appears to enjoy the overwhelming support of Parliament as well as around the country, including Jammu and Ladakh. I have been pondering deeply over the issue. Personally, I don't agree with a blanket condemnation of these developments. There are several positive points," he said in a statement.

"Ladakh's emergence as a Union Territory is to be welcomed. In fact, I had suggested this as far back as 1965 when I was still the *Sadar-i-Riyasat* of J&K and had proposed the reorganisation of the State," he said and suggested retaining the Hill Councils of Kargil and Leh.

"The gender discrimination in Article 35A needed to be addressed as also the long-awaited enfranchisement of lakhs of West Pakistan refugees and the reservations for the Scheduled Tribes, which will be welcomed. There will be fresh delimitation, which for the first time will ensure a fair division of political power between Jammu and Kashmir region," he noted.

His statement comes just two days after the Congress Working Committee (CWC) adopted a resolution deploring the move as "unilateral, brazen and totally undemocratic".

Dr. Singh, who has been a special invitee to the CWC, seemed undeterred even as he urged the Centre to start a dialogue with mainstream political parties of J&K to normalise the situation.

"Communal harmony should be maintained and violence should be eschewed... With my lifelong involvement in J&K, my sole intention is to further the intention of all sections of the State," Dr. Singh added.

The party has convened a meeting of the heads of all State units and Opposition leaders on Friday to brainstorm and explain the nuances of its position.

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