

## 'INTENDED TO CAMOUFLAGE ILLEGAL OCCUPATION': INDIA SLAMS PAK'S GILGIT-BALTISTAN MOVE

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India on Sunday slammed Pakistan's move to provisionally grant Gilgit-Baltistan the status of a province, stating that the region was an integral of India given that Islamabad was in illegal possession of the areas that were part of the union territory of Jammu and Kashmir.

The statement by the Indian foreign ministry rejecting the Pakistani action came hours after Pakistan's prime minister Imran Khan during a visit to the region on Sunday announced the changed status of Gilgit-Baltistan.

Analysts in India see Pakistan's move as a response to India revoking Article 370 of its constitution last year in August and integrating the region more closely with the rest of the country. India's action meant that New Delhi had taken the Indian-administered region off the talks table with Pakistan – something that infuriated Islamabad. Pakistan's action on Sunday would further aggravate ties with India, already at an unprecedented low over attempts by Pakistan to internationalise the Kashmir dispute following the revocation of article 370 by New Delhi and due to a series of terrorist attacks in India.

"The Government of India firmly rejects the attempt by Pakistan to bring material changes to a part of Indian territory, under its illegal and forcible occupation," Indian foreign ministry spokesman Anurag Srivastava said.

"I reiterate that the Union Territories of Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh, including the area of so-called 'Gilgit-Baltistan' are an integral part of India by virtue of the legal, complete and irrevocable accession of Jammu and Kashmir to the Union of India in 1947. The Government of Pakistan has no locus standi on territories illegally and forcibly occupied by it," he said.

"Such attempts by Pakistan, intended to camouflage its illegal occupation, cannot hide the grave human rights violations, exploitation and denial of freedom for over seven decades to the people residing in these Pakistan occupied territories. Instead of seeking to alter the status of these Indian territories, we call upon Pakistan to immediately vacate all areas under its illegal occupation," he added.

Earlier on Sunday, Pakistan's prime minister Khan on a visit to Gilgit-Baltistan said that one of the reasons for his visit was to "announce that we have decided to grant Gilgit-Baltistan the provisional provincial status," according to news reports from Pakistan including by Geo News.

Khan's visit came amid protests against the Pakistan government over its decision to change the status of Gilgit-Baltistan. On 8 October, a massive protest was organised by the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front and Student Liberation Front against the government's decision to make Gilgit-Baltistan a province in Muzaffarabad, capital of Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir, news agency ANI said. People from Gilgit-Baltistan, who have been living in other Pakistani towns, have also taken to the streets against Islamabad's arbitrary decision, ANI said.

Pakistan has done this with the "full knowledge that this weakens their own arguments against the constitutional changes in Jammu and Kashmir and violates the UN Security Council resolutions that they have been stressing on as a solution to the Kashmir problem," said former foreign secretary Kanwal Sibal.

"This is a double edged sword for Pakistan. They have decided to do this as a gesture of defiance as also under clear encouragement from the Chinese to bring about a change of legal status of the region within Pakistan with a view to consolidating the China Pakistan Economic Corridor," he said.

Khan could also have been motivated by the belief that toughening their stance against Kashmir would go down well with the Pakistan public amid protests being organized by a combined Pakistani opposition against Khan's government and the military establishment, Sibal added.

Khan's visit to Gilgit Baltistan also comes after Saudi Arabia in October issuing new bank notes after removing Pakistan-occupied-Kashmir and Gilgit Baltistan from Pakistan's map.

Gilgit- Baltistan, earlier known as Northern Areas has been governed by the "Gilgit-Baltistan Empowerment and Self-Governance Order of 2009", which established an electoral framework. Elections have been held in the region under the Order that provides for only limited autonomy.

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