

Britain's Labour accused of Kashmir freedom agenda.By **Chaitanya Kalbag**

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NEW DELHI, Oct 16 (Reuters) - Queen Elizabeth's tour of India slid deeper into controversy on Thursday with sources close to the Indian government charging that Britain's ruling Labour Party had a "hidden agenda" to create an independent Kashmir region.

Even as British officials scrambled to salvage the queen's week-long trip which has turned into a public relations fiasco, the sources, who spoke to Reuters on condition that they not be identified, said Labour's Kashmir position dated back to 1947.

The sources said British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook, who visited India last year as a member of the shadow Labour cabinet, had told Indian authorities the Kashmir issue was an "article of faith" with the Labour Party.

"The hidden agenda was ultimately to obtain an independent state of Jammu and Kashmir," the sources said.

"Cook genuinely believes that there is an unfinished business of Partition," they added.

The allegations were made just over a week before British Prime Minister Tony Blair and his Indian counterpart Inder Kumar Gujral are scheduled to meet bilaterally on the fringes of the Commonwealth summit in Edinburgh.

An official at Britain's high commission (embassy) in New Delhi declined to comment on the allegations.

Blair stepped in on Thursday to order a top-level drive to highlight the successes of the queen's visit and counter damaging coverage of the tour in India and at home.

Cook, who accompanied the queen on her visit to mark India and Pakistan's 50th anniversary of independence from Britain, was quoted in the Pakistani press as offering British mediation citing "historical perspective", but he denied making such an offer.

Gujral was reported to have responded by calling Britain a "third-rate power", a remark India's Foreign Ministry denied he had made.

Conservative politicians have used the tour to attack Cook, saying his handling of the visit was "unforgivable". But Cook told his cabinet colleagues on Thursday the tour had been an outstanding success despite local and British media reports.

The Indian sources speaking to Reuters noted that the subcontinent's partition into India and Pakistan had taken place in 1947 under a Labour government headed by Clement Attlee.

They said the Attlee government, in power from 1945 to 1951, had pushed through key United Nations Security Council resolutions in August 1948 and January 1949 that called for a plebiscite that would grant self-determination to Kashmiris.

The Hindu ruler of Moslem-dominated Kashmir, Maharaja Hari Singh, acceded to India but the move triggered the first war between the newly-created India and Pakistan.

The Indian sources said both Cook and Foreign Office minister Derek Fatchett had pushed the Kashmir plebiscite issue at the Labour Party's conference in Brighton early this month.

"Then we had the queen's speech in Islamabad where she urged India and Pakistan to 'end historic disagreements'," the sources said. "The Indian government is quite riled by what the British refer to as the 'Kashmir problem'."

The sources said Cook was responsible for inserting in the queen's banquet speech in New Delhi on Monday advice to India and Pakistan that "historical hostilities can be buried for good".



"This was abuse of hospitality tantamount to India's president advising the queen to ensure her ministers handle the Northern Ireland problem in a certain way, or the status of Gibraltar, or of the Falkland Islands," the sources said.

"All this set many of us thinking back...there was an agenda," they said.

The sources also quoted a Labour resolution at its October 1995 Brighton conference as saying that, while India and Pakistan had to participate in a Kashmir solution, "no such solution will be acceptable to this party unless it is acceptable, too, to the long-suffering peoples of Kashmir, Jammu and Ladakh".

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