

Greater Kashmir

Declare pre-partition JK as free trade zone: Conference

***India-Pak trade liberalization will make intra-Kashmir trade casualty: Zulfiqar Abbassi**

***Enhanced economic interactions through cross-LoC trade would improve straining ties between two nations: Slathia**

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Srinagar, July 10: The traders from both the sides of Line of Control Tuesday urged governments of India and Pakistan to declare the 'pre-partition J&K' as 'free trade zone'.

Speaking on the first day of a three-day conference, "Cross LoC Trade, Regional Development: Opportunities and Challenges", today, the participants pitched for increasing the number of tradable items for LoC trade.

The conference being organized by the Centre of Dialogue and Reconciliation (CDR) has 12 delegates from PaK.

The participants called for declaring the divided parts of J&K as 'free trade zone' and stressed the need of increasing the number of tradable items for LoC trade.

Chief Minister, Omar Abdullah could not attend the function. Minister for Industries and Commerce, S S Slathia who was the chief guest on the occasion, said that initiation of trade and travel across LoC is one of the most significant Confidence Building Measures by the governments of India and Pakistan.

Slathia said the enhanced economic interactions through cross-LoC trade would act as catalyst to improve "straining" ties between two nations.

About 60 participants representing various trade and business organizations of J&K and PaK are participating in the conference.

Slathia said the State Government is keen to promote cross-LoC trade, adding that the number of trade days has been increased from two to four a week. "21 approved items are being traded under a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP)," he said, adding that both the countries have established Trade Facilitation Centers (TFCS) near the entry points on both routes.

He said efforts are underway to replace present 'barter' system by providing Banking Transaction facility to the traders.

Slathia assured that the recommendation of the conference will be favourably considered by the Centre and State governments.

Mubeen Shah, President Jammu and Kashmir, Joint Chamber of Commerce (JKJCCI) said: "We had very high hopes from the cross LoC trade but it has somehow derailed due to callous approach of both governments. We urge both governments to declare pre-partition Jammu and Kashmir as "free trade zone".

Zulfiqar Abbassi, former president JKJCCI echoing similar views said: "Unfortunately our governments are not sincere in promoting trade. Initially it was agreed that 21 items will be traded via intra Kashmir routes. But after four years the number of tradable items has been reduced to mere 5 items and as a result traders are incurring heavy losses and they are losing their interest in this trade."

He said adding besides there are no banking facilities, no communication links; traders cannot communicate with each other. It is kind of a blind trade where buyer does not know who the seller is."

He added: "I believe if India and Pakistan will go for liberalization intra Kashmir trade will be the casualty. Most of the trade will be done through other transit points between two countries and it will lessen the importance of cross LoC trade. So we need to gear up and prepare ourselves in such a way that the importance of Intra- Kashmir trade is not diluted."