

OUTLOOK

Cross LoC Traders Conference Begins in J&K

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The first ever cross-Line of Control (LoC) traders conference began here today with the participants calling for declaring the pre-partition Jammu and Kashmir as a Free Trade Zone for making up missed opportunities of developing the region due decades of hostility between India and Pakistan.

The conference, organised by the Centre of Dialogue and Reconciliation (CDR), began here with 12 delegates from Pakistan-occupied Kashmir taking part in it.

It comes less than 10 days ahead of the scheduled meeting of India-Pakistan Joint Working Group (JWG) on cross-LoC confidence building measures.

Zulfikar Abbasi, who heads the Chamber of Commerce in PoK, said there were many issues concerning the cross-LoC trade that needed to be discussed between the stakeholders.

"The JWG is meeting for the first time on July 19...We want to discuss the issues concerning the cross-LoC trade and submit our suggestions to the group for making this trade more viable and active," Abbasi told reporters.

He said lack of banking facilities, communication facilities, disputes regarding goods transactions and payments were some of the issues to be discussed in the meeting.

Abbasi said India and Pakistan have seen development and free flow of investment since their independence in 1947 but Jammu and Kashmir could not benefit from the process as it was marked with a "red flag".

Abbasi said the two countries should expand the list of 21 items that are allowed for trade through cross-LoC routes for realising its true potential.

"And if the governments of India and Pakistan do not want goods traded through LoC routes to be further sent beyond Lakhapur (in India) and Kohala (in Pakistan), they should allow free movement of goods from Jammu and Kashmir to PoK and vice versa," he said.

He said the cross-LoC trade was operating at just two per cent of the potential and it had huge employment generation capacity.

On the allegations that cross LoC trade was being used for hawala transactions, Abbasi said, "It is an injustice. The trade was started by the governments of the two countries. These allegations are only to harass the traders."

State Industries Minister S S Slathia and former Foreign Secretary Salman Haider were among those who attended the inaugural session of the conference.