

NFIA conducts conversation with Lawmakers AND WHITE HOUSE officials

The Congressional reception sponsored by the National Federation of Indian American Associations (NFIA) last Thursday, October 18 was different from similar events in the past in many respects. First, the lawmakers who addressed the NFIA delegates coming from all over the United States discussed substantial issues in depth and went beyond the India centric topics. Secondly, there was a free exchange of ideas between the elected officials and the audience and finally they answered questions on foreign and domestic policy agenda presented by the NFIA. It was a meaningful dialogue with the members of the House of Representatives who talked more than just praising the Indian American community.

The luncheon was held in the room of the Rayburn House Office Building known as the Gold Room. The place was filled with more than 150 people who traveled from the States such as California, Oregon, Washington, Texas, Michigan, Philadelphia, New York, New Jersey, Illinois, Maryland, Virginia, Massachusetts, Georgia, Nevada, Washington DC and Tennessee. It was the most diverse audience representing different religious, regional, professional and linguistic affiliations.

A steady stream of lawmakers kept coming throughout the morning. More than a dozen members actually were able to address the NFIA delegates. Others came, said hello and joined in the lunch. Each of the guest speakers was presented one page listing the issues of concern to the Indo-American community. These topics dealt with issues on immigration reforms, Children Healthcare, Patriot act and civil liberties, Social Security and Medicare benefits, and respect for religious tradition of Sikhs during airport security checks.

Gary Ackerman (D-NY) was the first lawmaker to enter the room and spoke for more than 20 minutes. He said he was sorry to see the Nuclear Agreement between the US and India in trouble in India, despite the fact the US Congress has approved it. He lavished great praise on the Indian American Community for working so hard on the deal. "It is because of you people that the 123 agreement was approved by overwhelming majority by both houses of the Congress," noted Ackerman, "I can understand the difficulties Prime Minister Manmohan Singh is facing in India. It is part of democracy." In response to a question from the audience regarding what the Indian Americans can do now to overcome this hurdle, Ackerman said it was not for him to give advice. He told the NFIA delegates that he was still hopeful the agreement would be approved by both nations. Ackerman also touched on other issues and told the audience the Democratic Congress has approved the State Children Health Insurance Program (SCHIP), but the President has vetoed it. They were trying to override the veto. He explained that the US Senate needs 60 votes to cut debate and pass any bill, and we do not have 60 Democrats in the Senate.

Jim McDermott (D-WA), the current Co-chair of Congressional Caucus on India and Indian Americans said he would do all he can to prevent hate crimes against Sikhs. He said he collected all the elected officials in his State (Washington) and impressed upon them to

need to prevent hate crimes against Sikhs. He said he was working with Sikh community to facilitate the security checks at the airport without being asked to remove their turban. "You should get involved in the presidential campaign of any candidate at this time. Once the person is elected he/she would remember you and you will have an access to White House. After the elections, you will not have the same clout," advised McDermott.

Congressman Ed Royce (R-CA), the past Co-chair of the Congressional Caucus reminded the audience that under his leadership the Caucus grew from 12 members to 180 members becoming the largest caucus in the House. Currently the Caucus has nearly 200 members. Royce who was initially in the column of Anti-India lawmakers and was convinced by Indian Americans in Orange County to join the India caucus has been since then a staunch supporter of India. He was responsible in removing sanctions placed against India after India detonated a nuclear device. He pledged to work with community on issues of its concern.

Representative Joe Wilson (R-SC), the Republican Co-chair of the India Caucus was sitting in the room when he got a call for a vote on the House floor. That day the House was voting to override the Presidential veto on bill on Children Insurance approved by both houses. Wilson promised to come back and he did. Wilson who has an Indian American as his Chief of Staff narrated his very positive interactions with the Indian American Community. He has campaigned for the successful campaigns of Nicky Randhawa and Bobby Jindal. "Bobby is going to become first Governor of Indian origin in Louisiana on Saturday," predicted Wilson.

Mike Honda (D-CA) took the NFIA paper with issues listed and discussed them one by one. He said he agreed with the suggested solutions on virtually every one of them except giving preference in awarding visa to highly skilled professionals. "I will have to think about it," he explained. He said he can work with the NFIA in resolving other issues.

Chris Van Hollen (D-MD) was born in Karachi and spent many years in Southern India. He recalled his pleasant memory of his years that he spent in India. His father was in Foreign Services. He said he has made many friends in the Indian American community, such as Parthasarthy Pillai, the past president of the NFIA and one of the organizers of this event. He said he would work with the NFIA to promote quality health care, protection of civil liberties and immigration reforms.

The Founder of the India Caucus, Frank Pallone (D-NJ) was warmly received by the audience. He described the difficulty Congress was facing in getting its agenda move forward. In a Democracy, one cannot speed up the approval of bills in the House and Senate, said Pallone. Sixty votes are needed in the Senate to cut debate on any issue. Procedural difficulties make it harder to get anything approved. He told the delegates that that is the price one pays for having a Democracy.

Other Representatives of the House who came and joined in the lunch were Bobby Scott (D-VA), Gregory Meeks (D-NY) and Danny Davis (D-IL) and briefly addressed the audience.

The lawmakers were introduced by a person from their State, who knew the Congressman more than others. These legislative leaders always want to meet people from their districts.

At the conclusion of the Congressional Luncheon, people went to the White House to listen to the Administration views. Only those individuals were admitted to the White House who had submitted their date of birth, country of citizenship and Social Security Number prior to being invited. Three officers of the Bush Administration addressed the people present. Todd Braunstein, Special Assistant to the president spoke about the efforts of President Bush to bring about comprehensive reforms in immigration. “The President is fully committed to this issue despite opposition in the House,” he said.

Brian McCormack discussed the trade policies of the Administration. Deputy Assistant Secretary for Policy, U.S. Department of Labor Deborah Nirmala Misir, who is from Guyana and has roots in Nagpore, India, spoke at length about economic and labor issues. She portrayed a rosy picture of economy under the Bush Administration.

Rajen Anand emceed the program, and with Parthan Pillai, Joydeb Roy and Radha Krishnan coordinated the Congressional luncheon and White House briefing. The sumptuous lunch was catered by an Indian Restaurant, White Tiger.

The NFIA delegates attended the 25th anniversary celebration of the India American Forum for Political Education (IAFPE) on Thursday evening. IAFPE was founded by Joy Cherian and was an off shoot of the NFIA.

The Ambassador of India, Ronen Sen, hosted a lavish lunch for the NFIA delegates at the Embassy on Friday at noon. Sen complimented NFIA as an umbrella organization for its efforts to keep the community unified and its role in improving the cooperation between India and the United States. He said the relationship between the two countries was based on equality of partnership. The relations are strong, for both countries are benefiting from this cooperation. “The cooperation is beyond the Nuclear Agreement and is many areas,” emphasized Sen. It is in the areas of trade and technology, agriculture, space exploration, biotechnology, defense, cultural exchange and many other fields, he added. The Ambassador cited some very impressive statistics to show that this cooperation is bilateral. For example, he said that last year, there was a 61% increase in export from India to the United States, whereas there was only 16% increase in imports to India. In other areas also there has been a steady progress.

“It was a general consensus that the people who came from out of town found the program very beneficial. They had an opportunity to interact with lawmakers, heard the Administration’s point of view, attended the 25th anniversary of the IAFPE, and finally they were not only treated to a lavish lunch at the Embassy, but also heard an inspiring speech by Ambassador Ronen Sen,” remarked Joydeb Roy.

(Prepared by Rajen Anand)