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PRESS NOTE: THE KASHMIR FILES

In response to a media release by the Classification Office dated 20 March 2022 (Sunday) on the release of an Indian film 'The Kashmir Files', the High Commissioner, H.E. Mr. Muktesh K. Pardeshi has written to Mr. David Shanks, Chief Censor, Office of Film and Literature Classification on 21 March 2022. The letter reads:

Dear Mr. David Shanks,

I am writing to you in response to a media release by the Classification Office dated Sunday, 20 March 2022 stating that the decision to grant an R16 certificate to an Indian film **The Kashmir Files** (2022) is under review. Your media statement notes: "*The Kashmir Files film has not been banned in New Zealand. However, after we completed our initial classification process, concerns were raised with me about potential risk of harm to the Muslim community in relation to the release of this film. These concerns appeared to us to be genuine, and sufficiently serious to cause us to pause and review our classification for this film.*" The statement further clarifies: "*To be clear this review is not a ban or a commitment in any way to change the original decision. It may end up being the same.*"

2. In this connection, I would like to state that an unnecessary controversy has been created in New Zealand during the weekend regarding the film and its planned release. As it is understood, the film was to be released by the Event Cinema across New Zealand beginning 24 March 2022 for which an R16 certification (Restricted to persons 16 years and over) has been granted by your organization. The Kashmir Files was released in India on 11 March 2022, and is being screened in several countries abroad including in the United States, United Kingdom and Australia in the Oceanic region.

3. It is gathered that some organizations led by the Federation of Islamic Associations of New Zealand (FIANZ) have approached the New Zealand Government, including the Hon. Prime Minister urging to stop the release of the film. There are concerning reports that the Office of the Chief Censor is under tremendous political pressure.

4. During the last few days, I have received countless calls and e-mails, expressing deep concerns from Kiwi cine-watchers and the members of the Indian diaspora who have been looking forward to watch this movie in New Zealand theatres. As New Zealand procedures allow for anyone to approach the Chief Censor with his/her views, please allow me to convey our views in the matter:

- i) The film 'The Kashmir Files' is made by an independent and well-known film maker, Mr. Vivek Agnihotri;

- ii) The film is about the exodus of Kashmiri Hindu Pandits and gruesome atrocities perpetrated by the extremists on them in the 1990s;
- iii) The film intends to educate future generations about the menace of extremism and terrorism which can create havoc for safe and peaceful co-existence of communities all over the world;
- iv) In India, the film has received critical reviews and overwhelming popularity;
- v) The film has been watched by political leadership, including Prime Minister of India Shri Narendra Modi who said that “it is not an issue about a Film, but that of ‘bringing out the truth’ and ‘presenting history’ in its correct perspective”;
- vi) During the weekend, we have seen expression of support being extended by political leaders in NZ such as Hon. Winston Peters, former Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs; Hon. Melissa Lee, Member of Parliament & Co-Chair of the Parliamentary Friendship Group on South/ South-East Asia; and the ACT leader and MP Hon. David Seymour. We have also seen reports and editorials appearing in Indian ethnic media such as the *Indian Weekender* and *Indian Newslink*;
- vii) The film has been released in several countries abroad particularly in the United States, the UK and Australia where it has been received well by the audience;
- viii) An erroneous, biased and politically- motivated impression is being created in the minds of New Zealand audience that the film is likely to create a sense of disharmony and Islamophobia. The fact of the matter is that the film is about a tragic episode which occurred more than 3 decades ago and the present generation deserves to know historical events in a correct and truthful perspective. There has been no cases of disharmony and any breach of peace in India or elsewhere in the world where the film is currently being shown;
- ix) We all believe in the fundamental principle of freedom of expression. If there were no freedom of expression, the human kind would have not seen films and books on wars, holocaust, political conflicts and other tragic historical events; and
- x) Over the last two-three decades, India-New Zealand cooperation has progressed well including in the field of film making. Many Indian films have been shot in New Zealand, and above all, there exists a faithful, discerning and mature audience of Indian Cinema in New Zealand.

5. In view of the above, may I kindly request you to take a holistic, balanced and fair view of the matter within the remit of the Films, Videos, and Publication Classification Act 1993, and not as a result of disinformation and political activism led by some sections of vested interests? If any additional information is required, the High Commission of India would be very pleased to engage with you and your team with a view to promote Indian Cinema in New Zealand.

With best regards,

(Muktesh K. Pardeshi)

Wellington, 21 March 2022

