

**R**eiterating Pakistan's principled stand on Kashmir, Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz has assured the nation that there was no change in the fundamental stand of the country on the Kashmir issue. He repeated Pakistan's traditional and longstanding position on that the Kashmir issue should be resolved according to the wishes of the Kashmiri people.

Mr Aziz's statement followed President Musharraf's call for initiating a debate in the national media on various options he suggested for resolving the Kashmir problem. In the context of satisfactory pace of ongoing peace process between Pakistan and India, what President Musharraf has proposed is not only useful but also timely. By rejecting the conversion of LOC into a permanent border, he made it clear to India that Pakistan would never accept the perpetuation of status quo in the state. His proposal to consider options other than plebiscite under the UN Resolutions is an advice to the Pakistani nation to accept ground realities while considering possible solutions of the Kashmir problem.

This is the most opportune time to initiate such a debate as Pakistan and India are engaged in a process of normalising their relations. Pakistan has time and again reminded Indians and international community that unless the core issue of dispute was addressed there was no chance of permanent peace in South Asia. The statements by the world leaders, who recently visited Pakistan and India, indicate that most of the countries, share Pakistan's views that a permanent and just solution of Kashmir problem cannot be delayed for long. It is, therefore, essential that the issue be debated at national level so that a consensus emerges and negotiations on Kashmir are held in a transparent manner.

# Options on Kashmir

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It is also not fair to assume that President's call for debate on various options on Kashmir amounts to change in Pakistan's principled stand on Kashmir. It rather reinforces our stated position that in search for a solution to the Kashmir problem, Pakistan and the opinion of its people can neither be ignored nor sidelined. It should also be kept in mind that it is not for the first time that Pakistan has talked about options other than UN-sponsored plebiscite in Held State.

In 1960s when, through behind-the-scene efforts of the USA and Britain, Pakistan and India engaged in talks on Kashmir, Ayub Khan had hinted at Pakistan's willingness to accept any means other than plebiscite, which could help ascertain the wishes of the Kashmiri people to determine their future status. President Musharraf has made the statement in the same spirit and made it clear that there was no question of any solution of Kashmir problem, which is not acceptable to the people of Kashmir. The January 6 Islamabad Declaration issued after President Musharraf's meeting with Mr Vajpayee clearly committed the two countries to finding a solution to the Kashmir issue which would be acceptable to both Pakistan and India. But Pakistan has declared that whatever is acceptable to the Kashmiris will be acceptable to it, underlining central position of their will in any decision on the future of the state.

The past history of Pak-India relations vis-à-vis various moves to seek solution of the Kashmir problem has brought to the fore certain irrefutable

facts. These are: One, Kashmir cannot be solved through the use of force. This holds true for Pakistan as well as for India. Pakistan cannot force India to give up Kashmir and India cannot continue its forcible occupation of the state indefinitely. Two: the only way to resolve the dispute is through talks between Pakistan and India. No other country is ready to intervene on behalf of Pakistan, despite all human rights violation in the valley. Three, the current situation in Kashmir with ever-increasing human toll as a result of clashes between the freedom fighters and Indian security forces cannot go on for long as the economy of the valley has been shattered and miseries of the people have multiplied.

There is increasing pressure on India to put an end to the atrocities committed against the people of Kashmir. Four, peace cannot be guaranteed in the region without resolving Kashmir issue. Five, both Pakistan and India will have to go beyond their stated positions to meet somewhere half way to find a mutually acceptable and just solution of the Kashmir problem. Six, although Pakistan still maintains that the UN

Resolutions should be the basis of any solution of the Kashmir problem, it has become increasingly clear that the option of plebiscite is not exercisable due to total opposition from India and lack of support from the international community. Seven, the world at large has rejected the Indian position that Kashmir is its integral part. These facts determine the parameters of a framework within which efforts can be initiated to find a lasting solution of the Kashmir problem.

In a subsequent statement, President General Pervez Musharraf made it clear that he was not presenting any specific solution to the problem. Rather, the purpose was that all the options should be discussed openly and in a frank manner so that an approach could emerge, which enjoys the support of the nation. This would help achieve a speedy solution to the Kashmir problem without Pakistan and India being unnecessarily struck in the initial modalities. Now the ball is in the Indian court. It cannot shirk its responsibility to come forward with its alternative options based on the recognition of the fact that the present status quo in the state is acceptable neither to Pakistan nor to Kashmiris.

A review of the past one-year's peace diplomacy between Pakistan and India would reveal that the two countries have already taken one important step in the direction of finding a mutually acceptable and peaceful solution of the Kashmir problem. This important step is the holding of ceasefire along the LoC for the last one-year. For the first time over the

past last 57 years, guns along the line that divides Kashmir between Pakistan and India have fallen silent for such a long period. The people living on both sides of the LoC have heaved a sigh of relief. They have resumed their normal work of cultivation and grazing their livestock in the lands along the LoC and for that matter only wish that the borders continue to remain peaceful so that their lives and properties are spared. With the consolidation of ceasefire along LoC and successful implementation of some of the CBMs, Pakistan and India have announced schedule for the second round of composite dialogue starting from mid-November through the end of December. This is going to be crucial as among other issues, peace, security and Kashmir will also be on the agenda of these talks. This necessitates a national debate on various options on Kashmir.

President Musharraf's call for national debate should also be viewed in the light of past efforts to resolve the Kashmir problem under which various options were presented. But none of those succeeded in making any headway. There options suggestions dividing the state along communal lines, finding solution within the Indian constitution with maximum regional autonomy, making LoC as permanent border, putting the state under joint Pak-India or UN control and declaring the state as independent entity. But movement on these options was stalled by the fact every option contained certain elements, which were not acceptable to either Pakistan or India. The option presented by President Musharraf is meant only to generate a debate along the lines, which reflect ground realities and are acceptable to all the three parties to the dispute. As such this is a useful initiative because it can help clarify many an issue, which were not touched upon in earlier options.