

Holidaying for Kashmir

We must do something to benefit the Kashmiris and move the cause forward to mark Kashmir Day, rather than laze around and sleep the whole day

Hit and run

Shakir Husain



The Government of Pakistan in all its wisdom has declared Kashmir Day, February 5th, as a public holiday yet again. While I empathise and sympathise with the Kashmiris, I question the logic of declaring a public holiday and wonder how this holiday translates into support for the Kashmiris. Given the current peace moves with India, I also wonder how this holiday plays out with our overall diplomatic strategy — that is, if we have one.

A public holiday means that businesses are shut down and productivity is brought to a grinding halt. Since Pakistani productivity and efficiency is much lower than even our regional cousins, another holiday just means that our annual average is brought down further. I fail to understand how one day where everyone sits at home and watches TV or sleeps promotes the cause of Kashmir or the Kashmiri people. I wonder how much support comes from the members of the Federal Chamber of Commerce and Industry for this holiday, as they are the people who lose a lot of money by the shutdown of production in their factories. The government should ask the small traders and shopkeepers who have to shut their shops how they feel about this cause when they lose money because of senseless holidays.

And then of course the government should sit and calculate how much money they lose in taxes and revenues by this one-day holiday. In Karachi alone one days' strike causes about one billion rupees in losses to the national exchequer — I think if

half of that would be sent to Kashmiri refugees it would do a lot more for the "cause" than a day's holiday.

The arrangements made for Kashmir Day include a five-minute silence at 10:00 am throughout the country. I, for one, will step out and see how our disciplined nation observes this "moment". According to news reports, Lok Virsa is arranging stalls of Kashmiri foods in Islamabad so that once the mandarins have led their Kashmir Day "walks" and are suitably peckish, they can once again express solidarity with their starving Kashmiri brethren by pigging out on delicious Kashmiri cuisine. While the food is being consumed Kashmiri songs will be played so that more solidarity can be expressed.

After the food, we have Kashmiri photographs and an arts display so that the *begamaat* can get their shopping sorted out as well. The Pakistan National Council of the Arts is doing its bit by arranging dramas and a puppet show at the Liaquat Memorial Hall. Now I don't know about most readers but to me this sounds exactly like a *mela*. Food, song, shopping, theatre and a puppet show for the little ones. A day of fun and frolic all in the name of Kashmir and the Kashmiris. I wonder how the average Kashmiris across the border would feel if they were shown photographs of all these events and told that this was happening in their name? I have a feeling that the reaction might be unprintable in this publication.

The amount of money spent in the name of the 'Kashmir cause' is appalling especially given the poverty and injustices that our own citizens have to face right here in this country. If any clear-minded Pakistani actually believes that the people of Kashmir want to join the Pakistani Federation then they are in for a very rude surprise. I am sure the Kashmiris are a literate people and have access to the

Internet, and when they read about how we mismanage our own four provinces, I doubt if they want to be added as a fifth.

According to several reports, the Kashmiri political leadership ideally wants an autonomous state or a semi-autonomous deal with India. The Government of Pakistan keeps pushing for a plebiscite in Indian Held Kashmir, but fail to mention that if this happens, a plebiscite will also have to be held in what we call Azad Kashmir; and what happens if the vote goes the other way?

As we saw with the Kargil fiasco there is no military solution to this complicated dispute, and it is absolutely criminal for both countries to be spending the huge amounts they currently do to maintain the status quo.

Meanwhile, millions of rupees are being spent on Kashmir Day buntings, decorations, billboards, advertisements, besides the millions lost due to the holiday. I would urge the Public Accounts Committee to actually publish the costs associated with Kashmir Day so that the tax payers can be further motivated to pay taxes for these frivolous expenses. It would also be interesting to get an independent polling company to figure out how much closer the people of Pakistan feel to the Kashmiri cause as a result of these inane exercises. The writing is on the wall — just as Pakistan had to do a U-turn on its' disastrous Afghan Policy, we will have to begin to rethink our Kashmir policy if we are to normalise ties with India. And if only the mandarins in Islamabad can do what's in the best interest of this country, rather than chase pink elephants, Pakistan would be better off for it. In the meanwhile, I hope everyone enjoys their extra vacation time.

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Can the Kashmir dispute be resolved?

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The slow progress of the India-Pakistan composite dialogue, particularly with regard to Kashmir, is attributed to assertions that the Kashmir dispute is a complex one to which there can be no quick fix solution. However, this merely reflects the hidden agenda of deliberately contrived delay. New Delhi's statement that it has no intentions to marginalise the dispute is certainly encouraging, but the total lack of progress has begun to generate pessimistic vibes even though the two sides keep stressing the need for further deliberations and dialogue.

The question that whether or not they will be able to resolve this complex dispute continues to haunt South Asians. The answer is yes and no. Yes, if the involved parties are sincerely determined to remove this complex impediment on the road to peace and stability, without which South Asia will never be able to acquire peace and harmony.

There are three parties involved in the Kashmir dispute: India, Pakistan and the Kashmiris. Each of these parties has objectives that contradict the others. Given the conflicting nature of objectives, the dispute may linger on

for quite some time, obstructing the advent of desired peace. Perhaps the intricacies that surround the dispute would be more comprehensible if one analyses each party's objectives.

The hasty surgical partition of India by the British left the integration process of princely states into India or Pakistan incomplete, bequeathing this painful legacy to the inheritors of the British Indian Empire. Since then both India and Pakistan have been deeply engaged in securing the disputed state.

The British could have resolved the dispute by announcing that for those states that did not exercise their option to join either India or Pakistan by August 10, 1947, the British would decide their fate on the basis given to the rulers of the states to facilitate their decisions. Lord Mountbatten in his address to the rulers categorically stated that the decision must be based on the principles of geographic proximity and the aspirations of the people involved.

Initially India argued its case on the basis of the maharajas' decision to join India, but did not apply a similar argument when absorbing Junagadh and Hyderabad. In recent times the argument has revolved around the fact that so much has happened during the last 57 years and the Kashmir dispute should be resolved keeping in view the

ground realities. Thus the emphasis is on recognising LoC (Line of Control) as the permanent border -- but to disturb the existing LoC may unleash many complex problems.

Compared to India, Pakistan has been arguing its case on the basis of UN resolutions, which secured commitments from both countries to hold a plebiscite to determine the fate of Kashmir. Cognisant of ground realities (domestic, regional and international), Pakistan has generated the impression that it is willing to consider other options. This of course does not mean that it has abandoned the UN resolutions, but it wants to give a chance to all those possibilities that can facilitate the resolution of the ongoing dispute.

The third party involved is the Kashmiris. The Kashmiri groups engaged in freedom struggles do appear to be divided in their adopted approaches and objectives but it would be difficult to ignore their aspirations now especially in the light of their sacrifices. Therefore it is essential to have their input in the ongoing dialogue.

The incumbent peace process was initiated by the Indian Prime Minister Vajpayee's April 18, 2003 offer and strengthened by subsequent steps taken to normalise communication and transportation. The success of the 12th

Saarc summit and the joint statements of January 6, 2004, further injected strength. Following the end of the first round, another joint statement was issued in New York on September 24, 2004 reiterating the resolve of the two governments to take the process forward with sincerity of purpose.

While the first round of Indo-Pak dialogue has yielded some dividends, not much progress has been registered regarding the Kashmir dispute, Siachin, Sir Creek, or Baglihar, notwithstanding optimistically orientated statements that Kashmir will not be put on a back burner. Admittedly both sides issue statements asserting the need for further negotiations and reflecting that some forward movement has taken place, the delay in making tangible progress especially regarding the Kashmir dispute, is giving birth to too many apprehensions and misgivings.

Undoubtedly the Kashmir dispute is a complex issue and may take more time compared to other relatively less complicated issues, but people on both sides are eagerly waiting for some tangible outcome. So far it has not come. Even the second meeting of the Foreign Secretaries was unable to generate hope for tangible results. In fact the Indian Foreign Secretary is reported to have even said that there exist no com-

mon grounds as far the Kashmir dispute is concerned. Such statements tend to dampen optimistic streaks. This is not the right approach. The two sides should seriously consider the two key words that have been expressed by the leaders of India and Pakistan. President Musharraf has repeatedly highlighted the need to employ the principle of flexibility, whereas Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has asserted the importance of the principle of sincerity. If both these principles were purposefully employed, the chances of resolving even the most complex dispute would intensify rapidly.

The Indian insistence on forgetting Kashmir and 'let's do business' will not only make things very difficult for Pakistanis but may also force them to revert to UN resolutions and the accompanying plebiscite option. To extract the maximum benefits from the principles of sincerity and flexibility, both sides need to comprehend the need for reciprocity. If serious and sincere efforts were made along with injections of flexibility, then it would be difficult to deny the possibility of an optimistically orientated outcome. However, if the application of these principles is effectively impeded, then pessimism is bound to engulf the entire process.