

# Composite dialogue and Kashmir issue

By M.H. Askari

INDIA has expressed satisfaction at the progress of the composite dialogue launched about two months ago, and aimed at bringing to an end the decades-old tensions in the subcontinent. In an address to the nation on August 14, the eve of his country's independence anniversary, prime minister Dr Manmohan Singh said that the talks so far "augur well" and called for further deepening of the dialogue.

Pakistan, in somewhat less effusive language, has also acknowledged that the ground covered so far in the bilateral talks indicates that the two sides have been able to pave the way for "further movement" towards the goal of peace and security.

Apparently, there is a reason to believe — as a report in this paper said the other day — that the leadership in India and Pakistan has "courageously decided" to confront the challenge: "The brave act of the leaders has created change in the prolonged tense atmosphere."

Several unanticipated aspects of India-Pakistan relations surfaced during the talks but that only encouraged the interlocutors of the two countries to enlarge the scope of the talks. However, it would be unrealistic to suggest that the talks were pursued without any element of contention. Since a significant section of policymakers in India continue to maintain that the whole Kashmir state as it was constituted at the time of independence should form part of India, there appears to be no consensus there on the future of Kashmir. There are also elements in Pakistan who strongly believe that Kashmir is not negotiable at all as the principle on which the subcontinent was partitioned meant the state with its 95 per cent Muslim population and no road link with India should form part of Pakistan.

It is reassuring that Pakistan's prime minister-designate, Shaukat Aziz, has endorsed the way out of the imbroglio as suggested by President Pervez Musharraf — a solution based on the wishes of the Kashmiri people. It is unfortunate that bureaucracy sometimes creates insurmountable hurdles in the way of a congenial basis to resolve festering issues such as the future of Kashmir. The apparent denial of a visa to a Srinagar-born Kashmiri girl living in Pakistan to visit her ailing parents in her ancestral home in Srinagar is a most regrettable human tragedy.

The authorities in both parts of the troubled state should take a humane view of the difficult situation in which the Kashmiris sometimes find themselves, specially when they need to travel from one part of the state to the other. Travel

basis of the wishes of the Kashmiri people. While talking to Lord Nazir, member of Britain's House of Lords, he pointed out that he had a personal association with Kashmir as his mother belonged to the state.

It is reasonable to presume that the Indian prime minister, Manmohan Singh, had among other issues the Kashmir dispute in his mind when he declared, in his Indian Independence Day address from the ramparts of Delhi's Red Fort, that India had always favoured the process of a "purposive dialogue" with Pakistan to resolve all outstanding issues. He also said specifically that "the assurance of peace and prosperity in our neighbourhood is an important priority for us."

The continuing tensions between the Kashmiri leaders (in occupied Kashmir) and New Delhi are potentially a major hurdle in the way of India and Pakistan jointly attempting to resolve the Kashmir dispute. As evident from the statement of the Kashmiri leader, Syed Ali Shah Geelani, it is the lack of trust. Mr Geelani has gone on to make the prophecy that when the composite dialogue reaches the stage of Jammu and Kashmir, India would "show its thumb to Pakistan".

In the course of the composite dialogue so far, although not yet in the context of Kashmir specifically, Pakistan has had no such experience.

Mr Geelani also believes that India will go no farther than a "solution around the Line of Control (LoC)". Pakistan has every hope that in accordance with the spirit in which the dialogue has been conducted so far, India will negotiate with Pakistan with an open mind. If the objective is to work towards the goal of a durable peace, Kashmir will have to be resolved on a sustainable basis. Anything short of that would not ensure lasting peace. Both India and Pakistan will be required to shift substantially from their

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The authorities in both parts of the troubled state should take a humane view of the difficult situation in which the Kashmiris sometimes find themselves, specially when they need to travel from one part of the state to the other. Travel between the two parts of Kashmir is on the agenda of the composite talks, but for the present, both governments could perhaps develop an interim basis for the grant of visas specially to people placed in circumstances and deserving compassionate treatment.

In a press statement the amir, Jamaat-i-Islami, of Azad Kashmir has taken a position on several issues that can only create difficulties in the way of arriving at a settlement. He has expressed the view that the "core" issue has been intentionally sidelined in the composite dialogue whereas the agenda for the dialogue specifically provides for a resolution of the problem. Moreover, Kashmir is scheduled to be taken up at a higher level, possibly at the level of General Pervez Musharraf and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh when they meet on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly.

The prime minister-designate Shaukat Aziz has also made it clear that Pakistan would continue to support a solution of the problem on the

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respective committed positions.

Pakistan has given a clear enough indication that it is ready to do that. For the sake of the success of the composite dialogue, New Delhi can be expected to do the same.

Even at the risk of repetition, it may be recalled that the day India sent its forces into Kashmir (October 26-27, 1947) Pandit Nehru made the solemn declaration: "Our view which we have repeatedly made public is that the question of accession in any disputed territory or state must be decided in accordance with the wishes of the people and we adhere to this view..."

Less than a month later, he said for the umpteenth time in a letter addressed to Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan: "Regarding Kashmir, the question of accession should be decided by plebiscite or referendum under international auspices such as those of the United Nations..."