

The crisis of confidence

7-8-04

By Afzaal Mahmood

Pak. F. Relations
Dawn

IT WILL be most unfortunate if we allow history to repeat itself and wreck the incipient India-Pakistan peace process even before it has taken off. The recent turn of events threatens to do just that.

Things seemed to be progressing smoothly and the success of the foreign secretaries' June meeting in New Delhi had even raised expectations of an early movement. The first signs of trouble in the on-going peace process appeared last month at the end of External Affairs Minister Natwar Singh's visit to Pakistan. He described the attitude of Pakistani leadership as "constructive and positive" and his discussions with them as "warm, frank and realistic".

But surprisingly, the statements, issued by the two sides after Mr Singh's meeting with President Musharraf, told a different story. They reflected not only differences of interpretation but also a sharply different tone. As against the optimism expressed by Mr Singh, the Pakistani statement highlighted the need for the final settlement of the Kashmir issue "in a reasonable time-frame".

New Delhi promptly questioned the interpretation of the talks put out by Islamabad and expressed its "disappointment" over the tone and substance of Islamabad's press release. For the first time in many months, New Delhi and Islamabad got involved in public argument and abandoned the normal practice of giving an identical version of talks by their respective spokesmen. Fortunately, the rhetoric on both sides has so far been restrained. But it can get out of hand in the coming days if each side decides to put its own interpretation on bilateral talks which will be held as part of the composite dialogue.

It is heartening that President Musharraf has said that he had a "wonderful interaction" with Mr Singh and that his mentioning of a "year and a half" as a reasonable time-frame to settle the Kashmir issue was in response to a question on the attitude of India that it could not be rushed into a final settlement". Mr Singh, it may be recalled, had said that India wanted to take the peace process further, but it was not a 100-metre race and it could not be artificially rushed.

The Pakistan foreign office spokesman, explaining some of the questions arising out of an official statement issued after Musharraf-Singh meeting, said the process of the composite dialogue, since it was agreed to by the leadership of India and Pakistan in January this year, had so far maintained a satisfactory pace and the foreign ministers of the two countries would meet in Delhi in early September after having held meetings at the levels of foreign secretaries and senior officials.

He, however, argued that "we have to

have time management on the Kashmir dispute to resolve it within a time-frame". But if Pakistan is satisfied with the "pace" of the composite dialogue, then why this sudden emphasis on a time-frame to settle the Kashmir issue? We should have at least waited till the "substantial" meeting between the foreign ministers of the two countries on September 5-6 to see whether India was serious and sincere in discussing and resolving the conflict.

Also, we are dealing with a newly-installed government in New Delhi which is not even three-month old. It is still in the process of consolidating its position and most of its time is being consumed in keeping its coalition partners happy and attending to urgent domestic issues. It is unfair and unrealistic on our part to expect a democratically elected government to move

Every effort should be made to make a success of the wide-ranging talks in which Islamabad and New Delhi are engaged at the moment. The last time they embarked on such a bold exercise was in 1998-99 but the Kargil conflict put a speedy end to that effort. Let us hope the "composite dialogue" now underway proceeds uninterrupted. It is a multi-track, multi-speed process. At its preliminary stage, it entails a number of parallel discussions between senior officials from India and Pakistan, with the most contentious subjects (security and Kashmir issues) reserved for the foreign secretaries. Later the two foreign ministers will review progress, this time on September 5-6 in New Delhi.

The composite dialogue is expected to deal with all the differences between the two countries so that all their bilateral disputes

are resolved. We in Pakistan should understand clearly that there cannot be equal, simultaneous progress on all the agenda items because some of them are less complicated than others. But the Indian interlocutors must also understand that some progress or forward movement on each item of the composite dialogue is necessary if the dialogue process is not to come to a sudden halt. It is this danger to which President Musharraf referred to in his Dawn interview when he suggested: "we need to move CBMs and the dialogue process in tandem with each other."

The important thing is to keep the dialogue process

going because as it progresses it will provide both governments with many positive options. The desired results can only be achieved if the dialogue process lives long enough to open up options and possibilities that cannot be foreseen at this stage. Both Islamabad and New Delhi need to create an environment in which a lasting solution of the Kashmir issue will be desired by the majority of the people in both countries.

But if every dialogue with India is going to be judged by how Islamabad has scored over New Delhi or vice versa, then the composite dialogue between the two countries cannot move forward in substantial terms. On the other hand, every positive step from one side could invite a reciprocal one from the other and convert the milieu of mistrust into one of mutual confidence.

Pakistan has kept its promise of fully cooperating in checking cross-border infiltration. India should now respond by undertaking a series of actions on its part designed to improve the security environment and human rights conditions in Kashmir. Such measures will go a long way in not only improving the political environment in Kashmir but also making the on-going peace process more productive and result oriented.

The writer is a former ambassador.

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boldly on a highly sensitive issue like Kashmir without first creating a consensus and political climate for this.

In an auspicious development, President Musharraf has further clarified the statement, attributed to him, about a time-frame for a Kashmir solution.

In a panel interview with Dawn on August 4, he said he had not asked for any time-frame for a solution of the Kashmir dispute but had only called for a fast pace. "But what I would like to say is that we should move as fast as possible because if we don't then we cannot have confidence-building measures (CBMs)," the president said. "We need to move CBMs and the dialogue process in tandem with each other. This is what it is."

The need of the hour is that the tricky question of relationship between Kashmir and confidence-building measures should be resolved to the satisfaction of both the parties. Pakistan desires that progress on CBMs should not be at the expense of putting Kashmir on the backburner. India wants that normalization of bilateral relations should not be held hostage to the Kashmir question. President Musharraf's formulation that CBMs and dialogue on conflict resolution should proceed in tandem offers a sensible via media between the two positions and India should have no problem with that.