

**T**he new Indian Army Chief General Nirmal Chand Vij is reported to have said in an interview on January 22, 2003 that the score with Pakistan had not been settled yet.

He said this in an interview given to his former army colleague retired Major General Ashok Mehta. "Vij is quite clear," said Mehta, "that despite the partial withdrawal of troops the army can be called up (to the border) any time at short notice in the future as the score with Pakistan had not been settled as yet."

This is a surprising statement coming from an army chief in a democracy, where politicians normally make such statements often for political purposes. Is the General reflecting the Indian government's thinking and likely future policy regarding dealings with Pakistan. Or is the statement his own bravado as a new head of the army making an effort to raise the morale of his troops. The morale of the Indian army was considerably reduced owing to the 10-months long deployment on the international border in bad weather conditions.

This was often referred to as "de-

ployment fatigue" resulting in many accidents and acts of insubordination amongst the troops.

Was the Indian army chief while mentioning the 'score to be settled', taking a cue from the aggressive statement of his own minister of defence Mr George Fernandes who threatened to wipe out Pakistan if it dared to launch a nuclear first-strike. The minister said this on January 7, 2003 while addressing an international meeting organized by a business club in Hyderabad. The minister was probably reacting to a statement, which was attributed to President Musharraf, about the possibility of using nuclear weapons. Pakistan later denied the statement attributed to President Musharraf.

Whatever the provocation, it does not behove a large country like India which is planning and hoping to play a major role in world affairs to threaten a small neighbour of dire consequences. Such provocative

Pak-F. Rel-India  
Nation  
28-1-03

# Score to settle

Lt. Gen. (Retd) Sardar F.S. Lodi

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statements will not help to improve relations between the two countries, they only show the mind-set of India's leaders and their obsession with Pakistan.

Talking of scores to settle as the Indian army chief has said reminds one of the score settled by the late Mrs Indira Gandhi the Prime Minister of India in 1971. She sent her troops into the former East Pakistan in utter violation of international law, the charter of the United Nations and the norms of civilized conduct between nations. However,

the entire strategic scenario in the South Asian region has changed since 1998, and for the better in the long run.

Sanjeev Miglani wrote from New Delhi, which was reported in a section of our press, that: "Analysts say last year's inconclusive military standoff between the neighbours highlighted what many had feared when the two conducted tit-for-tat nuclear tests in 1998, that India would no longer dare go to war with Pakistan."

Miglani went on to say: "Nearly five years after India and Pakistan became nuclear powers, New Delhi is finally coming to terms with what that status means - the threat of a Pakistani first-strike has neutralized its (India's) conventional superiority (in men and material)."

If this is the reality as spelt out by experts, it may not be wise for the army chief in India to talk of score to settle. This utterance sounds like an

incitement to the public at large, in a country where the politicians have already created a charged atmosphere to serve their political ends on the eve of elections in many states. At the level of the army chief one is expected to weigh his words very carefully before making statements and giving interviews which would be quoted in the press.

Analysts now concede that New Delhi gained little from the long standoff except the ire of its own troops. According to Maj Gen Mehta, Gen Vij paid a visit to Israel recently ostensibly to study the methods adopted by the Israelis to foil suicide attacks and terrorism. India has a long history of military cooperation with Israel and The trip may have strengthened the General's resolve to use aggressive tactics against Pakistan, but they seem out of tune in the present scenario.

Finally it must be appreciated that India and Pakistan have to exist side by side in South Asia. As nuclear weapons have precluded the possibility of war between the two countries, it would be in the interest of both to sit down for a meaningful dialogue.

# Chilling nuclear disclosure

Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf's disclosure that he planned an "unconventional" response to a possible Indian attack across the border last year has sent tremors through the international community. His statement, and the Indian response to it, are a grim reminder that South Asia is still "the world's most dangerous place".

To be fair, Gen Musharraf's statement—that Indian troops "should not expect a conventional war" if they "moved a single step across the international border or the Line of Control", and further that this was conveyed to "Prime Minister Vajpayee through every international leader who came to Pakistan" did not explicitly use the words "nuclear weapons".

It is also true that Maj Gen Rashid Qureshi later "clarified" that "the President only meant unconventional forces, and not nuclear or biological weapons...They (a section of the media) took this unconventional form of people rising against the Indian armed forces as meaning nuclear weapons..."

However, the world is likely to interpret the statement as a disclosure, or at least a broad hint, that Islamabad had made preparations to use nuclear weapons at some point during the 10-month post-December 13, 2001, eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation, as New Delhi in all probability did; he also conveyed a nuclear threat, however obliquely, to India.

This conclusion is not unwarranted. For one, historically, nuclear threats have been generally made not through overt, explicit references to nuclear weapons, but through warnings of "horrible" consequences, etc. For another, it is broadly understood, especially after the Kargil war, that both Pakistan and India would have contingency plans to use nuclear weapons; both have doctrines that permit such use (in Pakistan's case, a first strike).

And for a third, the specific context to which Musharraf referred was an exceptionally dangerous situation, with a distinct potential for escalation from "limited" skirmishes, to large-scale war (with conventional weapons and methods), on to a nuclear exchange.

Even assuming that Musharraf had in mind "non-traditional" war, involving far more lethal armaments than those deployed in past India-Pakistan wars, or the use of unconventional manoeuvres (encircling of Indian forces by the Kashmiri people), the immediate response from India's forces suggests the assumption of a more aggravated scenario.

Thus, outgoing army chief Gen S Padmanabhan said: "We were absolutely ready to go to war. Our forces were well located but such a decision is ultimately a political decision." Padmanabhan dismissed the notion that Pakistan's nuclear capability had deterred India from going to war twice last year. He said: "When we assess our adversaries, we



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assess all [their] capabilities. We had evaluated it [Pakistan's nuclear capability] and were ready to cope with it." Padmanabhan hinted that an "informal" nuclear command structure has already been in existence. "What is invisible today will become visible tomorrow."

The highest interpretation that can be put on this exchange is that the threshold for an India-Pakistan nuclear confrontation has now fallen to a dangerous new low. Amidst the heightened visceral hostility, which the two states' rulers mutually nurture, nuclear weapons could be used not at the flag-end of a conventional conflict, when the defeat of one adversary appears imminent. They may be used early-without much warning.

This week's verbal exchanges have further raised the temperature of India-Pakistan rivalry. There have been several such recent exchanges, including the hubris-driven claim by each state that it "won" the recent border confrontation against the other. Two months ago, India's defence minister George Fernandes declared "victory". Now, Musharraf has announced: "We have defeated our enemy without going into war...The enemy has withdrawn its forces..."

In reality, both India and Pakistan lost billions of dollars in staging the globe's biggest military mobilisation since World War II, involving a million troops. Both imposed avoidable hardship and fatigue upon their forces by keeping them on high alert for long periods.

Both sacrificed the lives of scores, if not (a few) hundreds, of their soldiers in landmine blasts, shelling, and accidents. In India, the estimate is 300 armed personnel dead, and an unspecified number of civilians, along with loss of limb to several hundreds, and the death of countless sheep, goats and cattle. Neither gained strategic advantage or political-diplomatic leverage from the confrontation.

Both India and Pakistan parody, ridicule or altogether demonise each other's intentions, plans and actions. Thus, *The Hindu* quotes officials to say that India believes that Musharraf was "addressing a domestic audience" on Monday. He "wanted to show" that it was India which "backed down" after mobilising its troops. "India believes Musharraf wanted to bring the India-Pakistan issue under the spotlight once again" when the international community's interest in it is "waning". India treats Musharraf's statement "with disdain".

At the same time, New Delhi has termed Musharraf's statement "highly dangerous" and "provocative" and used it to reject any meaningful "forward movement" in mutual relations.

Such casual, cavalier exchanges between the two receive tub-thumping reception from the expected cheerleaders: strategic "experts" and hawkish politicians. This sows the irrational illusion that each side is in some sense "prepared" to match/counter the other's "nuclear" challenge, that nuclear wars are winnable, that "protection" is possible against these mass-annihilation weapons.

This is heady Macho mythology, the most dangerous part of the pathological mystique associated with nuclearism. For there are, can be, no victors in a nuclear war. Nuclear weapons are strategically irrational. They cannot protect civilian non-combatants. Rather, they make them especially vulnerable.

The best "security" nuclear weapons afford is of a negative kind — based on fear, insecurity, balance of terror. It is at best cold comfort to know that retaliation is possible after the adversary's first attack. But nuclear retaliation is an act of senseless revenge, not of regaining security.

Yet, both India and Pakistan are hurtling towards inducting nuclear weapons into their armed forces. Pakistan announced last April it was upgrading its strategic nuclear command. India is planning to establish this month its Strategic Forces Command (SFC) tasked with managing the nuclear arsenal. "The Cabinet Committee on Security is expected to give the formal go-ahead...A nuclear command post in the shape of a concrete underground structure is also being built," reports *The Times of India*.

For the moment, the nuclear system's different components will be kept separately. The radioactive cores will be with the Department of Atomic Energy, the detonation assembly will be in the custody of the Defence Research and Development Organisation, and the delivery vehicles with the armed forces.

This is one more step in the direction of raising the nuclear danger in South Asia. Yet, given its preoccupation with the Middle East, and the many actions of the US government in legitimising nuclear weapons, the world community is unlikely to intervene in this region to counsel restraint and halt India and Pakistan's descent into a nuclear arms race.

The pressure for such restraint will have to come from within. In today's vitiated climate, that is a tall order. India's government, the country's most rightwing and conservative since Independence, has decided that it will obstruct the normalisation of relations with Pakistan as much as possible. That's what the latest visa restrictions mean. Pakistan has duly reciprocated this hostility. Only a strong peace movement can alter this dismal situation.