

'Diplomacy' by bodily harm?

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One of the most sickening aspects of the now utterly vitiated state of relations between India and Pakistan is the crass way in which the two governments deal with each other's citizens, media persons and, increasingly, even diplomats. Over the past year, they have consciously fomented a sense of enmity, blocked people-to-people contacts and movement, and frozen economic exchanges and physical communication links.

On December 29, their mutual relations reached a new low when India's Home Ministry announced, without even consulting the Foreign Office, a fourfold reduction in the number of Indian cities Pakistani nationals may visit. Worse was yet to come. A few days later, Home Minister L K Advani personally vetoed visas for certain Pakistani scholar-activists invited to the Asian Social Forum in Hyderabad from January 2 to 7—after their applications had been cleared by all the concerned authorities thanks to its persistent lobbying by the organisers.

For many of us at the ASF, the now-on, now-off process of getting successive clearances for their visas seemed to be nearing fruition just when Advani struck. Among the invitees were some of Pakistan's best-known public intellectuals and peace campaigners, including Pervez Hoodbhoy, I A Rahman, Asma Jahanangir and A H Nayyar, all of who were listed to speak at this first-of-its-kind continental event with eight major conferences, 160 seminars and 164 workshops, besides plenaries.

Earlier, the Indian High Commission in Islamabad had arbitrarily clubbed together numerous visa applications and pruned the number to be approved. Thus, only about 10 of the 50-plus Pakistani invitees could make it to Hyderabad—a collective loss for us all.

Since then, the two governments have been targeting top-level diplomats too. Perhaps the worst instance of this kind was the charge that last Saturday India's acting High Commissioner, Sudhir Vyas' official vehicle was blocked. According to the Indian protest note, the mission car, flying the national flag, was stopped and boxed in by four four-wheelers and two motorcycles. It was blocked "with the charge d'affaires and his wife inside for up to 45 minutes at a time".

Following this, the Indian government promptly ratcheted up diplomatic pressure on Pakistan and announced the creation of a new post: Additional Secretary (counter-terrorism). It might further restrict people-to-people contact, by tightening visa norms. Vyas was reportedly harassed on Monday too when Pakistani police vehicles came "dangerously" close to his car. Three vehicles, including a pick-up van, surrounded the car all the way from his residence to his office.

However, there is a background to these incidents. The Pakistan High Commission in New Delhi claims its officers have been systematically harassed since early January. On January 7, it complained: "lately the surveillance of the flag vehicle being used by the acting High Commissioner has been increased to such a level that it can be simply termed as harassment". For the last three days, it said "intelligence vehicles are constantly following the vehicle bumper to bumper, making it extremely difficult for the driver to drive". Sometimes these vehicles' "dangerous manoeuvres" can "lead to a serious accident..."

As these incidents get highlighted in the media, both New Delhi and Islamabad accuse each other of violating the Vienna Convention of 1961 for the treatment of diplomats, and the bilateral Code of Conduct (CoC) they signed in 1992.

Both are right. Just as both are wrong to have indulged in a venial tit-for-tat responses. But this only shows how sordid the India-Pakistan situation has become.

Earlier too, middle-level diplomats, and embassy personnel suspected to be spies, used to be subjected to verbal abuse, in-



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trusive surveillance and actions such as "physical harassment, disconnecting of telephone lines, threatening telephone calls, pursuit in cars and unauthorised entry into residences"—which the CoC explicitly prohibits. People in the latter category were beaten

black and blue and sent home.

That was nauseating enough. But now, for the first time, Heads of Mission and their official vehicles are being targeted.

Beyond a point, it is irrelevant to ask who fired the first shot or provided the provocation. What matters is that both states have resorted to grossly uncivilised intimidatory methods. Both accuse each other in the crassest of ways: of indulging in "preposterous political propaganda", "intimidation" and "wilful harassment", or of concocting "motivated" and "baseless" allegations. Ironically, the terms of abuse are identical or symmetrical!

Three points are relevant. First, the very fact that Foreign Secretaries of India and Pakistan had to negotiate a 12-point Code of Conduct in 1992 despite the existence of numerous international conventions on the treatment and the rights of accredited diplomats, tells its own story. It shows the two governments often act out of an intention to harass and cause bodily harm to each other's diplomats.

This kind of diplomacy-by-bodily-harm probably has no parallel in the post-War era. Even in the worst phase of the Cold War, US and Soviet embassy staff did not have to fear for their physical safety. But in India and Pakistan, the notions of dignity and personal inviolability of diplomats stand threatened.

Second, what is more shameful, India and Pakistan have repeatedly breached their own agreed Code, including provision (vi), which says their Foreign Office/Mission would, "in the first instance, look into the circumstances of (a) complaint (of breach) before lodging a formal protest". This violation speaks of despicably puerile mindsets and deplorable conduct.

Third, these incidents are bound to leave deep wounds on a critical section of our policy-makers long after relations are normalised. Most diplomats who have served in each other's country are bitter about their experience and harbour terrible prejudices. They get to see (and suffer) the worst aspects of Pakistan's and India's domestic life.

If powerful functionaries are treated this way, the gruesome reality of what India and Pakistan do to lesser mortals can only be imagined. Take the latest case in which an innocent Pakistani youth was set free by a Delhi court after finding that the Directorate of Revenue Intelligence, which booked him, had "mistaken his identity" for a drug smuggler's. Like the 182 fisherfolk detained for years, there are literally hundreds of such cases, which violate and waste human beings.

Fighting with bare knuckles puts India and Pakistan in the worst possible light. We can carry on this level of confrontation only at an enormous risk to our security, safety, prospect of mutual coexistence, and our human dignity. Our leaders seem to think they wield, and have the right to wield, the power to jeopardise all this—to the point of threatening to exterminate millions of people with nuclear weapons.

Underlying this is not just visceral, incurable, enmity and mutual hatred, but the two governments' contempt for their own peoples. They simply don't care whether their people's lives, human lives, are successful, or they are wasted or sacrificed to their states' coercive powers.

Postscript: As if India's suspension of rail services between Wagah and Attari wasn't vengeful enough, Pakistan has physically ripped up and carried away the rail tracks on its side, according to *The Asian Age*. It will be a long, arduous process to restart the Samjhauta Express if and when the two states someday agree to do so.