

India-Pakistan detente

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Slowly but with determined efforts India and Pakistan are inching towards detente. The two long-time adversaries have taken measured steps to ease the tension and bring normalcy in their relations. Two dramatic gestures by Pakistan — ceasefire and unconditional resumption of over flights — and their swift acceptance by India have paved the way to the resolution of disputes through dialogue. The pace of confidence building measures is gathering speed. Let us take a pause and recount what has been achieved so far, what other CBMs are in the pipeline and what more needs to be done.

Ceasefire at the LoC, working boundary and Siachin has come into effect and is holding. The Kashmiris on both sides of the LoC have joyously welcomed the silencing of the guns. Last Monday, the first day of the ceasefire, they gathered on the opposite banks of Nelum River shouting *Salams* to the long-separated relatives. They hurled letters wrapped around stones to each other and exchanged gifts of *mithai* (sweets). Some jumped into the freezing Nelum to cross over the other side to embrace their friends and relatives. Luckily, the onlookers pulled them out before the swift river currents could swallow them. Their joy was justified because they — Kashmiris on either side of the LoC — suffered the collateral damage caused by the shelling.

The resumption of the Lahore-Delhi Dosti (Friendship) Bus Service has enabled the divided Muslim families and others to visit each other. It is a limited service; four buses ply each way per week transporting small number of passengers, 400 in all. This is very inadequate and results in long waits for the intending travellers who mostly come from Sindh or other far off places. A case in point is of a Sikh family, which was travelling from Iran

to Delhi by land through Pakistan. It is marooned in Lahore because it could not get bus seats. It cannot walk over to the other side because crossing of border on foot is not permitted for travellers under 65. This rule is ridiculous and most inhumane and ought to be amended.

The air links and over flights will be restored from the New Year's Day. This was made possible by President Musharraf who unilaterally and unconditionally lifted the ban on the over flights. Some people have criticised this goodwill gesture of President Musharraf. They argue that restoration of over flights would financially benefit India more than Pakistan. This is a frivolous argument and would not stand the test of deeper analysis. No doubt, India was suffering financially, probably more than Pakistan, but the bigger losers were the people who had to follow a lengthy and expensive route to travel between India and Pakistan.

A meeting of the Indian and Pakistani railway officials is scheduled in mid-December to work out the resumption of the rail link. It is expected that by the New Year the suspended Samjhota Express would start shuttling between Lahore and Amritsar. Its revival would greatly relieve the congestion at the Dosti bus stations. Perhaps at a later date, once the trust between the two countries has been strengthened, the two governments may agree to run the Samjhota all the way from Lahore to Delhi and vice versa saving the passengers from great inconvenience.

Pakistan and India may soon be talking to relieve the poor fishermen of the two countries from frequent arrests by their respective coastguards.



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The unarmed fishermen are the convenient targets of the two navies.

They are arrested and then released by an executive order as a goodwill gesture. The other country follows suit and gradually all fishermen go home after having spent long time in jails. Once the jails are empty of fishermen, the game starts all over again. It is a costly but joyless game with no benefit accruing to either country.

The Indian offer of introducing a bus service between Srinagar and Muzaffarabad should not be left unattended. Pakistan should press for talks on this offer to thrash out modalities for travelling across the LoC. A Kashmiri from the Indian Held Kashmir wishing to visit his relatives in Azad Kashmir or vice versa is required to cross over from the internationally recognised border. To do that he is obliged to take a long and circuitous route to reach his destination. A journey, which could not have taken more than a couple of hours, is turned into an odyssey. The opening of LoC for travel would greatly relieve the divided Kashmiri families from unnecessary hardships. Similarly, Pakistan should press on its proposal of starting a Lahore-Amritsar bus shuttle.

Offer to restore the Khokhrapar-Munabao railway link has been made and accepted but so far no date has been fixed for the talks. The reopening of this link would meet a long-standing demand of the *Mohajirs* who are mainly concentrated in the Sindh province. Presently, they have to travel all the way to Lahore to enter India, which is costly and time consuming.

This is the season of CBMs. They are raining like monsoon. There are so

many of them afloat that it has become difficult to keep track. It is not important now which country first proposed a specific CBM. The important thing is that both countries are responding positively to each other's suggestions towards detente. Some CBMs have been implemented, some are under discussion and some are still in the pipeline. It now largely depends on the bureaucracies of the two countries to make the CBMs work. The bureaucracy by nature is slow moving. It needs constant prodding to make it move at a brisker pace.

The two governments have not yet given any indication for the improvement of telecommunication services between the two countries. The telephone service between them is fragile either through design or because the telecom equipment connecting the two countries is outdated. The two governments as yet do not allow operation of cellular roaming between the two countries. A cellular subscriber of Pakistan visiting abroad can receive calls on his cellular phone from home but not when he is visiting India. Perhaps some unidentified security considerations are preventing the two countries from introducing this modern telecom facility.

The nation has welcomed the peace initiatives of President Musharraf and Prime Minister Mir Zafarullah Khan Jamali. The ceasefire has given buoyancy to the stock market. The tense-free environment will encourage the flow of foreign and domestic investment. Let us start looking forward instead of always looking to the past, which retards progress. We should remain firm in our cause, without being belligerent. We should follow a Biblical proverb in our statecraft: "A soft answer turneth away wrath". Belligerency begets belligerency but an argument spoken softly but firmly wins the day.