

Letter from New Delhi

An elusive peace

Pak. Fed India
Dawn

6.12.03 By Kuldip Nayar

A NEWSPAPER published the other day a cartoon showing President Pervez Musharraf in the UN building lobby and Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee at some distance with his aide whispering in his ear, "Sir, hide behind this pillar; he is coming this way."

New Delhi had reduced the stance of not meeting Musharraf to a farce. Elaborate arrangements were made when the two were staying at the same hotel in New York to ensure that Vajpayee would not come face to face with Musharraf even accidentally. What would have happened if Vajpayee had run into the Pakistan President and even greeted him?

Such gimmicks are understandable from the rulers who have no popular base, but not from the leaders who are chosen by a free electorate. I do not know who is to blame — the prime minister's office or the foreign office. But the entire exercise was ridiculous from A to Z. Vajpayee should assert himself at least on points which lower his stock.

Even the observation, which Vajpayee made at Lucknow that he would meet "everybody in Pakistan," gave the impression as if he did not want to mention Musharraf by name. That may well be the reason why Musharraf said during a BBC programme that he had no objection to meeting the Indian prime minister on the sidelines of the Saarc summit.

I hope Pakistan is not contemplating having prime minister, Mir Zafarullah Jamali, to attend

Vajpayee and Musharraf. When they are together, probably seated next to each other, it would look odd if Musharraf were to make some remark and Vajpayee were to keep quiet lest his response be construed more than a meeting. It would be foolish on the part of anyone outside the government to draw the line and decide how far Vajpayee should go. Is he expected to conduct a monosyllable dialogue with Musharraf so that the talks do not transcend the limits of meeting? Is there some way to determine how a meeting stays a meeting and does not take the shape of negotiations?

Vajpayee too knows that the ceasefire on the Kashmir border is incomplete without the stoppage of infiltration. That he has repeated this even after Islamabad's response shows that he is averse to talking to Musharraf as long as terrorism continues. The message could not have been lost on Islamabad.

India is not trying to run away from the talks on Kashmir. Islamabad should recall Vajpayee's visit as a Janata government's foreign minister in 1978. At that meeting the Pakistan leaders accosted him, asking for talks on Kashmir. He turned the tables on them by saying, "let us sit here and discuss Kashmir right now." The Pakistan government was so flabbergasted that it fumbled for a reply. Kashmir was not mentioned again during his entire stay.

I believe Pakistan is willing to allow trade and relax visa restrictions if India accepts Kashmir as a disputed territory. Islamabad is again wasting its energy over technicalities. When New Delhi says it is prepared to discuss Kashmir, it concedes that it is a dispute of sorts.

the summit. This will mean that Islamabad is not serious about the Saarc. Technically, it may be correct for Jamali to represent since he is the prime minister. But he does not enjoy the powers which a prime minister normally does.

Some in India are, in fact, seeing in such a situation an opportunity of building up Jamali against Musharraf. They do not know even the ABC of Pakistan. Jamali has publicly acknowledged that Musharraf is "his boss." Let there be no doubt in anybody's mind on one count: the military rules Pakistan and there is nothing in the offing to challenge it.

Musharraf is a fact that New Delhi cannot wish away.

True, it would like a democratically elected government to rule Pakistan. But, unfortunately, the armed forces are so entrenched there that it would be a long wait if India wants the people's representatives to sit across the negotiating table.

That Musharraf himself announced the resumption of overflight facilities shows that the army commanders have given their blessings to the process of normalization. The lobby of fanatics within the army seems to have grown weak. America's pressure may be working. But credit is also due to Musharraf who has not been deterred by religious and anti-India elements, characterizing his response to India's initiative as "humiliating."

The tragic part is that India is still not clear what it wants to do. It was clear that it wanted to restore the status quo ante prevailing before the attack on the parliament house on December 13 two years ago. That has been more or less achieved. The only important point left is when do the two countries meet formally. India does not seem to be yet ready for that.

Realizing that Vajpayee cannot avoid meeting Musharraf at Islamabad, New Delhi has already begun arguing that there is a difference between meeting and negotiations. But why should New Delhi attempt to sabotage the possibility of a meeting between the two during the Saarc summit? Once again it shows the mindset of hawks on the Indian side.

The temerity of the officials appals me. They do not want any formal contact between

After all, it has never said that it will discuss Tamil Nadu, Madhya Pradesh or Punjab. It means Kashmir is a pending matter. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi too agreed at Shimla in 1972 that the question of "a final settlement on Jammu and Kashmir" would be taken up later. The word "dispute" has not been used. But when a matter is kept pending, how do you describe it?

The real question is that of cross-border terrorism which Islamabad has to tackle seriously. It does not seem to be doing so because the Pakistan spokesman is saying practically every day that his country was committed to support Kashmir morally and diplomatically. But Pakistan's involvement in cross-border terrorism is known all over the world.

Musharraf has to find an answer to that. When India recalls December 13 incident, terrorism will be uppermost in people's mind. Islamabad's reaction cannot be that it has tried its best to stall cross-border terrorism. It will have to translate its statement into action. The jihadis will have to be shackled and training camps closed. In fact, the opposite is happening. According to Pakistani newspapers, there are posters in the NWFP for fresh recruitment and for a three-week training.

Musharraf will have to do more to punish the jihadis and others to convince New Delhi that he really wants to make up with India. His offer to withdraw troops from Kashmir under Pakistan if India reciprocates in its part of Kashmir will sound more credible if he stops cross-border terrorism.

Yet I have not been able to understand the logic of not engaging Pakistan in some kind of a dialogue after the guns have fallen silent on the Kashmir border. Vajpayee himself has said, one cannot refuse to talk to neighbours. Officials of the two countries can sit across a table straightaway to discuss steps to stop cross-border terrorism. One thing will lead to another.

Sooner or later, both countries have to sit together to sort out their differences. Ultimately, the two will reach the conclusion that they have a great deal to learn about peace.

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