

Pakistan and India should bury the

By Iftikhar Gilani

NEW DELHI: Former Pakistan prime minister Benazir Bhutto has said that India and Pakistan should break away from the past to solve a multitude of problems. Although opposed to putting Kashmir on the backburner, Ms Bhutto toed the latest American line that India-Pakistan agenda be divided into two sets — one of Kashmir and the other issues, saying, "Both should be cooked on a linear stove with an identical flame and without hindering the cooking of each other," she said in an exclusive interview to Daily Times..

Still attractive and articulate, Ms Bhutto looked homesick during the talk and was often nostalgic about Pakistan, remembered her husband languishing in jail for the past seven years. Recalling her own prison years, she talked about how a person's self-confidence and dignity was targeted in jails. She inquired about prisons in India. Ms Bhutto said she would never ask for even the worst of her enemies to be humiliated and imprisoned. Excerpts:

Q: How do you see the latest situation emerging in the region and was your visit to India related to these developments?

A: I was in New Delhi to participate in an international conference. I was further enriched here by voices from India — diplomats around the world and even from Pakistan. I saw Asfandiyar Wali after a long time. I was able to exchange views with him on Pakistani politics, something I could not do in Pakistan..

My party, the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), has welcomed the recent peace initiative. Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's proposed visit to Pakistan has caused tremendous sense of congeniality between our two countries. As the two prime ministers are about to meet, there is big momentum behind them.

I understand diplomacy is coming out of the hands of the traditional centres that are foreign offices. While they still control diplomacy, it is now being assisted by public opinion and there appears to be a momentum of peace. I am optimistic and of course we will have to be cautiously optimistic where India and Pakistan are concerned. We have seen in the past many times that one step forward later brings two steps backward. However, it is a step forward and needs to be pursued.

Q: How do you view Vajpayee's proposal of common currency in South Asia? As we understand here Pakistan Prime Minister Mir Zafarullah Khan Jamali has not opposed the idea but has only said that it will take time.

A: If Mr. Jamali has welcomed it, then talks in Islamabad will be a great success. When France and Germany were at war with each other, it took them several decades to agree on a single currency. If we trade together and its volume goes high, then common currency is helpful. Whether South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) countries are in a position to adopt it immediately is something only Mr Vajpayee and Mr Jamali can say. I am not privy to any discussions they may be having or had on the issue. Right now, our focus ought to be to resume transport links and make borders safe and open. There isn't going to be much trade, if borders are not open. We need to go step by step. And who knows whether these steps will ultimately lead

to a common currency.

Q: What is your relevance to this peace process? Have you put forward any formula or idea to settle issues between India and Pakistan?

A: Yes, we have our own formula. For the last 50 years India and Pakistan have been fighting a territorial war — sometimes cold and sometimes hot. They have extreme positions on the Line of Control (LoC) and Kashmir..

My proposal is based on the India-China border dispute model. Let us accept that we have different positions on the issues, as China and India have on their territorial dispute. Despite the fact that China and India have good relations, they trade with each other and have no visible tension along the border. Delegations come and go. There is no violence in their relations.

We must learn from India-China relations to manage our affairs.

Simultaneously, we must also socially unite the Kashmiri people. Without prejudice to the territorial dispute and if we disagree on borders, we must agree that Kashmir people be given a corridor. Divided families are given an opportunity to unite.

I heard here how people across the LoC throw packets of biscuits and letters. They use their imagination and whatever means to bridge barriers to meet their near and dear ones. That is why it is important to unite Kashmiris socially and provide them opportunities in economy and tourism. I think such steps will really help to ameliorate tensions between the two countries and restore confidence amongst Kashmiris.

Q: Apprehensions in India are whether to believe in President Pervez Musharraf, who after all is a military ruler. How far he will be able to carry forward this peace process?

A: As far as our military government is concerned, they have taken up this peace initiative. There are concerns, three wars were fought when the military was in power. Since 1996, when democracy was de-stabilised in Pakistan, three times India and Pakistan came closer to a war.

But, we must also see, during last few years, governments in Islamabad are saying that they want normalisation of relations with India. They have assured the world community that Pakistan will stop militancy. They have closed offices of some militant groups. We need to test them before passing any judgment on their sincerity and ability. There is a consensus on peace in Pakistan. The Political establishment and the military establishment are in unison on the peace as the statements flying here and there tell us. Though there is agreement, we need to see, whether current government is in a position to deliver. If it succeeds, it will be a victory for South Asia. If they (the rulers in Pakistan) fail, then our people will like to have a government that can deliver on peace.

It is evident that a military government lacks political legitimacy and this is why my party has suggested that the former prime ministers be allowed to return home. They represent people. We should associate them with the peace process so that a broad consensus on peace is created in Pakistan.

Q: You have been championing the cause of democracy and in your own words military leadership has always taken the recourse of confrontation. Is the current government in a position to take some bold initiatives on peace and



Benazir Bhutto

will have support of your party? **A:** You see, right now when so much peace talking is going on, the LoC is still tense. Though there is ceasefire, our forces are standing against each other. I believe that democracy provides an international strength to a nation. When we see history, a democratic country has never attacked another democratic country. Maybe there has been a war between democratic and non-democratic nations. Democracy represents pluralistic functioning. In that system, people easily understand policies and decisions are questioned. There is a parliament, which is accountable to people. We have also seen that democratic countries don't support terrorism and engage themselves against other country.

If in the 21st century we want to create a peaceful global society free of terrorism and hatred, then we need to adhere to democratic principles. And as a Pakistani, my people should be allowed to get the benefits of democracy.

I understand, if I tell you there should not be a dialogue with a military government, I may be charged with putting blockades.

That is why I am saying that we should test the military government. As

a leader I had two options. In my country Kashmir is an emotional issue. I could have easily upped the ante on the issue to overthrow the Musharraf government. As people have done it in the past, I could have indulged in negative politics and opposed these talks. But my politics are positive. I take it as a moral victory for my party. We were first to talk about normalisation, free trade and extending SAARC. We brought together the proposal on South Asian Preferential Trade Agreement and even ratified it. We do believe it is our baby and hence it is our moral victory — that is being groomed..

Q: If you claim political legitimacy and mass support, why do you and Nawaz Sharif have not been able to launch a public campaign against the Musharraf government as you have done in the past to overthrow unrepresentative governments?

A: We are running our parties and are doing very well in Pakistan politics. He (Nawaz Sharif) leads his party from Saudi Arabia and I from London. We performed well during the last election. Our parties did well, because they had our guidance and leadership. I wanted to return to my country last year. But, I have been

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barred from contesting elections.

Then I decided to lead my party from outside, otherwise, my ticket holders, workers and polling agents instead of concentrating on elections would have been arrested and jailed. I wanted them to concentrate on polling. I am looking for an opportunity to return to my country as soon as possible.

Q: Given the power equation right now in Pakistan, whom should Prime Minister Vajpayee engage in Pakistan — President Musharraf or Prime Minister Jamali??

A: Right now in our country, the prime minister is just a ceremonial figure. Actual power rests with Chief of the Army Staff (COAS) General Musharraf. However, I believe that the forthcoming SAARC summit is going to be eventful. If our relations are transformed through SAARC, then it is more valuable. We want SAARC to toe line in the forums like the Association of South East Asian Nations, the European Union and other regional groupings. On the question of whom should Mr Vajpayee meet, if the general has given powers to Mr Jamali to proceed, then the latter will be able proceed. As Mr Vajpayee has said, he will meet everybody, maybe that means he will even meet Musharraf also.

Irrespective of whether he meets Musharraf or Jamali, it will be the former who carries weight, whether he speaks to Mr Vajpayee directly or indirectly. What matters really is how much he supports peace process.

Q: Here you met both Prime Minister Vajpayee and his deputy L K Advani. What are their expectations and apprehensions?

A: I discussed with both of them the situation in South Asia and the peace process. Mr Vajpayee particularly has done a lot for peace. He has great patience. He has not lost heart even after the failure of bus diplomacy or the Agra Summit.

Advaniji also told me that he was in favour of the Agra Summit and he wanted that peace should return to South Asia. But he has concerns about militancy in Kashmir. The US and British officials have communicated Musharraf's assurances to him that Pakistan will stop cross border terrorism. Only time will tell us what is reality.

Q: There was news that Pakistan government has arrested Maulana Masood Azhar. Has it something to do with the ongoing peace process?

A: Those who are arrested are released also. Right now I don't know how long he will be confined. As I know, he was arrested earlier, but was released thereafter. We have to see if the process is carried forward step by step. Putting peace in its place is a very sensitive job.

It is our moral victory that leaders in Pakistan have realised the benefits of peace and are against violence. At one time, when we used to demand that the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and other "extremist" groups should be banned, we were called traitors and security risks. But, now Pakistan's COAS is himself, toeing our line and has banned the LeT. He is saying he will not allow extremist groups to play from Pakistani soil. That was perfectly our stand.

Q: How do you see the proposal by some groups that the LoC be converted into an international border?

A: This formula often comes from India. But, there has been no consensus on this in Pakistan and I don't know if

there can be a consensus amongst Kashmiri groups on this or not. Ultimately it is their decision, but the information right now I have is, that there is no consensus on this neither in Pakistan nor in Kashmir.

Q: As you said General Musharraf has given some assurances to the US and British officials to put an end to the cross-border terrorism. Do you believe Pakistan is supporting terrorism?

A: I am a guest here and I wouldn't answer this question from Indian soil. People of my country would not like me to answer this question from here. You see me in London; I will give you a detailed answer.

Q: India has been alleging that the Kashmir movement is being funded from outside and external factors are largely responsible for the disturbances there?

A: There is a problem of money. But the greater problem is that people of Kashmir had been promised their right to self-determination. And that right still eludes them. There is no doubt about that. Now we cannot rewrite history. We must ask the people of Jammu and Kashmir what they want. One thing I know, people of Kashmir are involved in a struggle for getting their rights. There is a different view on this in India and there is different view on this in Pakistan.

With these extreme positions, we cannot make any progress. So now what we say is to put normalisation ahead of everything else. We have proposed to have two separate items on our talks. One is related to Kashmir and other is related to Indo-Pakistan and SAARC. So if we may progress on one item, it may create a climate to solve others or leave room for future generations to deal with the skewed issues.

Now if we start talking and insisting on differing perceptions, it might take us another 50 years. I am unable to do that. I would like to contribute to a sustained effort of normalisation.

Q: You support the view that the Kashmir issue can be taken at a later stage and we can take up other issues first?

A: This is the one way to put it. But it is not the way I put it. My perception is that you have two dishes cooking on a linear stove. You have the item of Kashmir. You have the item of the gamut of Indo-Pakistan relations. Maybe Indo-Pak relations cook faster. Maybe other one proceeds slower. I think it is important for people of India and Pakistan to feel that the Kashmir issue is not being ignored or put under the carpet. It is very much noted, acknowledged and accepted by India that Pakistan has a different point of view on Kashmir.

Q: You mean in future dialogues; Kashmir will no longer remain a core issue?

A: If we only talk Kashmir and nothing else we wouldn't make any progress. That has been the history of the past. I am here to say let us break with the history of past. We have a multitude of issues. Let us take different issues. Once again, I say, India has a border dispute with China but that has not held-up progress in other areas. Let us progress in other areas where we have a commonality of views. Prime Minister Vajpayee has talked about money laundering and narcotics. Let us move ahead on items that are do-able. I hope we can create a greater understanding and have normalisation of relations.

Indian writers stress close cultural ties

By Irfan Ali

KARACHI: Visiting Indian writers have emphasised the need for strong cultural ties between the peoples of Pakistan and India.

Two receptions were arranged for visiting writers in Karachi on Monday. Most of the Sindhi-speaking delegates who participated in the joint three-day India-Pakistan peace convention attended a lunch reception at the house of PPP (Pakistan People's Party) MPA (Member of the Provincial Assembly) Sassui Paleejo. Indian Sikhs attended a lunch reception arranged for them by PPP MPA Shazia Atta Marri.

Talking to the Daily Times at Ms Paleejo's reception, Dr Jethanand, an Indian Sindhi writer, said Indians and Pakistanis could come closer if the same Indian-Nepal visa system was introduced between Pakistan and India "There could be close cultural ties between the Indian and Pakistani Punjabis," said Dr Mahal at Shazia Marri's reception. He said he respects Fakhar Zaman's World Punjabi Conference and also the Punjabi language.

He said Ajeet, a Punjabi newspaper, published in Amritsar, is the largest circulated newspaper of the language selling 300,000 copies. "We have a Punjabi (Gurmukhi) alphabet, Punjabi language software and Punjabi literary organisations."

Shazia Marri sang a Punjabi folk song that drew big applause from the audience many of whom joined in and also sang mixed-language songs. Nand Lal Javeri, who lived in Shikarpur district before partition, said Sindhi culture prevailed at Ulhas Nagar, a Sindhi district in Mumbai.

He, however, added that the Sindhi language did not have a bright future in India. "We speak Sindhi, but our children cannot speak it," he said. He believed that cultural security was a must.

Hari Motwani said Karachi was a modern city within which factories could be established so Indian and Pakistani Sindhis could be encouraged to live together.

Heero Thakur said Sindhis were scattered across 26 states in India, but they were moving away from Sindhi culture because their children were happily adopting Indian culture.

He said cultural relations between India and Pakistan must be strengthened.

Sassui Paleejo said people on both sides were no strangers to each other. "We understand that they are part of us," she said, and suggested that Indians and Pakistanis who migrated from their ancestral places be given dual nationality. Ashok Mitra, Sumit Chakravarty, Sultan Shaheen and Lachhman Komal were also present.